

DAVID BAGGETT & JERRY L. WALLS



G O D
&
C O S M O S
Moral Truth and Human Meaning

God and Cosmos

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and Human Meaning*

DAVID BAGGETT
JERRY L. WALLS

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To Marybeth Baggett, with profound gratitude and love

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Introduction to Part I</i>	
1. Alone in the Cosmos	23
2. The Case for Abduction	54
3. The Problem of Evil, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility	79
<i>Introduction to Part II</i>	
4. Moral Value	115
5. Moral Obligations	145
6. Moral Knowledge	179
7. Moral Transformation	213
8. Moral Rationality	243
<i>Introduction to Part III</i>	
9. A Moral Argument	273
<i>Conclusion</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	309

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God and Cosmos

Introduction

THE NOTION OF moral truth today strikes many people—not most, but many much of the time, and a great many some of the time—as off-putting: dogmatic, judgmental, abrasive, pious, presumptuous. Sometimes it is connected and dispensed with superstition, and other times with imperialism and imposition. *Moralistic* is one of the worst terms of disapprobation and derogation nowadays, and this whole notion of morality is often castigated as the deepest source of blame. Ethical relativists, to foster more tolerant attitudes and ostensible openness to those of opposing views, encourage us not to overreach by assuming that our convictions have any purchase on those outside our culture or subculture; postmoderns of various stripes eschew totalizing meta-narratives, assume a hermeneutic of suspicion, and, in the process, leave behind anything like objective moral truth. Some downright celebrate leaving morality and its judgments, condemnations, inconvenient behavioral strictures, suffocating sanctimony, and dire warnings about brimstone and hellfire altogether behind.

We could not disagree more or demur with more adamancy. This book is based rather on the idea that morality matters deeply; that moral truth is real; and that it, in fact, offers us one of the clearest windows and veridical intimations into ultimate reality. This does not mean that we cannot see the ways in which moral language and practice can be perverted, the way people have on occasion imposed their moral convictions in inappropriate ways, the way all manner of evils has been perpetrated under the cloak of morality. We can see that all of those things have happened, but none of them provides any evidence to suggest that moral truth itself is to blame. In fact, most all of the abuses, perversions, corruptions, and various instances of cruelty, inhumanity, and meanness are best identified

for what they are and denounced for being as bad as they are only by holding fast to the category of objective moral truth, without which we lose the resource to renounce them robustly.

When we talk about morality, we wish to begin with clear cases of moral beauty that stir and inspire our hearts and minds. We think of Mother Teresa (and those of her ilk) dedicating herself to a lifetime of helping the poor and helpless, the marginalized and oppressed, the ostracized and disenfranchised; of William Wilberforce finding the moral courage and fortitude to keep fighting for the abolition of slavery in England despite widespread systemic opposition; of Martin Luther King, Jr. selflessly leading the charge against all odds and in the face of horrible persecution against segregation and racism; of warriors of justice battling sex trafficking of helpless girls; of those who have stood against apartheid or the wicked wholesale slaughter of Jews or Armenians or Native Americans; of relief workers who strive assiduously to provide clean water and nutritious food to children of poverty.

Of course, there are also spectacular moral failures to lament. Even Michael Ruse, a naturalistic philosopher, insists that he flatly condemns “as strongly as anyone the rapes in Yugoslavia, the atrocities of Hitler, the ongoing practice of female circumcision.”¹ We do not doubt for a moment that Ruse would condemn such practices, but we harbor grave doubts whether he can do so with as much principled conviction as a classical theist. Our point is philosophical, not psychological; Ruse is likely far better than his worldview, even as religious adherents are often worse than theirs. Morality—or so we will argue in this book—simply makes better sense, constitutes a better fit, in a theistic world than an atheistic world.

We are not going to spend time refuting relativists and subjectivists in this book. Nor postmoderns and moral perspectivalists. We are going to take on naturalists and secularists who wish to retain their convictions about objective moral truth. We will both agree and disagree with them. We will profoundly agree with them about the existence of moral truth, but we will also deeply disagree with them that those convictions make best sense in a naturalistic or atheistic world. The moral convictions in question certainly do not provide any evidence in favor of naturalism; arguably they exist in great if not irremediable tension with naturalism.

1. Michael Ruse, “Evolution and Ethics: The Sociobiological Approach,” in *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002), p. 661.

In contrast, however, the moral truths in question are readily if not easily explained and thus deeply congruent with classical theism generally, and with Christianity in particular.

This book will also not take on the growing chorus of moral anti-realists—skeptics when it comes to morality. As mentioned above, adamant voices from this direction are increasing in numbers and volume, and they need to be answered; in light of the huge problems naturalists encounter making sense of morality, the rise of anti-realists is altogether understandable. We hope to discuss this emerging and troubling trend in a later book. For now our focus will assume that moral truth is real—that those who would embrace such truths, irrespective of their worldview, are right to do so. Torturing babies for fun is both wrong and bad, and indeed unspeakably evil. Those who think presumptuous any book predicated on such an assumption of moral common sense will simply have to indulge us; if we are wrong about that, we are likely wrong about nearly everything. We gladly take the risk. We will argue that theism provides the best explanation of these moral truths that, for present purposes, will function axiomatically, contrary to the assumptions of one like Friedrich Nietzsche.

The German philosopher Nietzsche was well known for his famous refrain that “God is dead.” Some take Nietzsche to be affirming atheism. Others interpret the import of his mantra to be that God, even if he exists, has become increasingly irrelevant to the way people live their lives; even many professing theists are functional atheists. Either way, Nietzsche helped inspire the catchy title of a 2014 movie—*God’s Not Dead*.

The movie chronicles the story of a young college student who, against great odds and with little moral support, has to defend his faith in a philosophy class. The film garnered its share of both zealous defenders and ardent critics. With the supporters, we concur with its central idea that there are good reasons to believe in the supernatural, that religious belief does not require checking one’s brain at the door. The student takes up his professor’s challenge to defend his faith by hitting the books and adducing arguments from the realm of natural theology and apologetics, using strategies that, though cursory and rudimentary, remain at least suggestive of fruitful avenues to explore.

Despite such gestures in promising directions, however, the movie is disappointing in many ways, and inclines us to sympathize with many of the detractors of the film. Perhaps the most serious problem the film

manifests is that it strikes an inauthentic note, which is deeply related to why the movie comes up short as a work of art. The characters tend to be one-dimensional; the movie indulges stereotypes of various sorts; much of the dialogue is laughably unrealistic. The net effect of such poor aesthetic choices was a great deal of lost potential. The movie's penchant for caricature, simplistic critique, and pop psychological reduction of atheist convictions resulted in a film that missed its rather ambitious mark.²

God's Not Dead is no doubt meant as an encouragement to believers, especially young people whose faith gets assailed in the public square. Although we resonate with such goals, we do not think that a movie that depicts atheists as typically smug, arrogant, irrational, unreasonable, and obnoxious is the way to do it. The atheistic philosophy professor in the movie is so cartoonish, harsh, and dogmatic that it is unlikely that what he does in his class would even be legal; it is certainly not in the spirit of philosophy rightly understood. However much some believers might like to cast themselves as victims of such intellectual snobbery, secular elitism, and atheistic animus, real-life philosophy professors anywhere near the vicinity of this fictional portrayal are, in our experience in the field anyway, relatively rare. There are certainly dogmatic atheists, and even fundamentalist-type obnoxious atheists, just as there are obnoxious religious fundamentalists; but painting either group as a whole with such a broad and uncharitable brush is intellectually dishonest. If believers do not like to be stereotyped, pigeonholed, and summarily dismissed in this fashion, they should refrain from doing it with their interlocutors. It conduces neither to charity nor civil dialogue.

So why mention this movie featuring a smattering of apologetic arguments, a contrived storyline, farfetched caricatures, and a conspicuous absence of subtlety, nuance, and sophistication? We do not count it our job or duty or even prerogative to dictate to people what they like or don't like. However, the positive response to the movie by so many believers is troubling to us for several reasons pertinent to this book. Many defenders of the film seem convinced that the main or perhaps even sole purpose of movies is entertainment—to provoke feelings, make you laugh, or cry. Although entertainment is perfectly legitimate, this movie aimed for more.

2. With obvious exceptions, most believers in the Western world, imbued as it is with reigning ideals of political freedom, do not experience anything like real persecution. To think otherwise trivializes the actual persecution endured by many Christians in other parts of the world—not usually at the hands of secular humanists, incidentally.

This brings to mind business ethics students who inform their teachers, most soberly, that the purpose of business is to *make money*—which usually is taken to entail that pretty much anything goes. This strikes us as an emaciated picture of the purpose of business—what about a more expansive picture of what business is about? How about serving others, meeting needs, building relationships, following your passion, weaving a fabric of healthy, harmonious relationships—and in the process making a living? A narrow view of movies and the arts, too, strikes us as sadly myopic and theologically deficient. Especially when we are talking about an ostensibly Christian movie, what about conveying truth, provoking deep thought, smartly challenging reigning secular plausibility structures, imbuing wisdom, embodying excellence? And in the process, it can also entertain.

But even from the standpoint of entertainment, there is not much to be said for a movie lacking subtlety, depth, texture, honesty. A modicum of rudimentary apologetics is not enough to salvage a movie replete with simplistic caricatures and contrived narratives.

Believers, of all people, should not be so easily satisfied and mollified into acquiescence with mediocrity. David Bentley Hart writes that what is certain “is that, to this point, most of the unquestionably sublime achievements of the human intellect and imagination have arisen in worlds shaped by some vision of transcendent truth.”³

Just recently one of us visited the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, an amazing Gothic creation that took 200 years to complete. As my wife and I (Dave) stood speechless and mesmerized before the mammoth, imposing, impressive structure and took it all in, I could not help but think, “No sort of deflationary, arid worldview could motivate something like this.” The transportive experience evoked nothing less than a sense of the ineffable.

We hate to rain on the parade of our fellow believers who are excited by a film like *God’s Not Dead*, but the movie gives the impression that serious philosophical argument is far easier than it really is. Take just one example of the apologetics in the movie. The student defender of faith argues that secularists can’t make any sense of objective morality, quoting the Dostoevsky line that “everything is permissible without God,” as if that establishes the point.

3. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 6.

A skeptical philosopher recently wrote a scathing critique of the movie for the online version of *Psychology Today*. This was one of his points: “The ‘everything is permissible without God’ argument is one of the worst arguments for God. Not only are there many secular ethical theories, but divine command theory—the idea that God grounds all ethical truths—is one of the most discredited positions in all of philosophy. Not only is it subject to the *Euthyphro* problem (which suggests that God determining morality makes morality arbitrary) but it’s not clear that divine command theory is any better than a ‘God of the gaps’ argument: ‘What makes a good, good and the bad, bad? I don’t know, God did it.’”⁴

As our previous volume *Good God*—of which this book is a sequel of sorts—makes clear, we would dissent from his assessment here; in fact, we think it is based on a number of tired mistakes. The existence of “many secular ethical theories” assuredly does not show that such a list contains the best explanation of objective moral values and duties, or even a plausible one; divine command theory is but one way to try couching the locus of moral obligations in God; most divine command theories worth their salt do not entail that God grounds all ethical truths since most divine command theories are delimited to deontic matters of moral obligation; divine command theory has undergone a major resurgence in recent years, garnering defenses and articulations by some of the brightest philosophers alive today from John Hare to Robert Adams and from C. Stephen Evans to Paul Copan; the *Euthyphro* Dilemma has been, in our estimation and in that of many others, definitively answered in the recent literature; the rejection of theistic ethics based on the *Euthyphro* Dilemma likely assumes the idea of god as Demiurge rather than the God of classical theism; and a whole panoply of reasons has been offered to take theistic ethics and even divine command theory seriously beyond a “God of the gaps” approach.

Such stiff resistance to the apologetics on offer in the movie is implicitly encouraged, though, by the movie itself. Simplicity breeds simplicity; caricature multiplies caricature. This is why the critique of this movie matters.

Despite all of the various efforts to answer the *Euthyphro* Dilemma in the last decade alone, secularists continue relishing pointing to it as

4. David Kyle Johnson, “God’s Not Dead? Neither Is Philosophy.” Published March 24, 2014. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/logical-take/201403/god-s-not-dead-neither-is-philosophy> (accessed June 1, 2014).

an efficacious refutation of theistic ethics. In a recent book, *Plato at the Googleplex*, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, protégé of Thomas Nagel, confidently writes:

Socrates proceeds to formulate a line of reasoning that will prove to be of fundamental importance in the history of secularism, one that will be adapted by freethinkers from Spinoza to Bertrand Russell to the so-called new atheists of today, persuasively arguing that a belief in the gods—or God—cannot provide the philosophical grounding for morality. . . . What is still referred to as “the Euthyphro Dilemma” or “the Euthyphro Argument” remains one of the most frequently utilized arguments against the claim that morality can be grounded only in theology, that it is only the belief in God that stands between us and the moral abyss of nihilism. Dostoevsky may have declared that “without God all is permissible,” but Plato’s preemptive riposte, sent out to us across the millennia, is that any act morally impermissible with God is morally impermissible without him, making clear how little the addition of God helps to clarify the ethical situation. The argument Plato has Socrates make in the *Euthyphro* is one of the most important in the history of moral philosophy. . . . We humans must reason our way to morality or we will not get there at all. Relying on fiats, even should they emanate from on high, will not allow us to achieve an understanding of virtue.⁵

Answering these objections is eminently possible, but requires that we develop more sophistication in defending theistic convictions, not watering down and simplifying the complex matters at issue. It is remarkable that Goldstein acts as if the capricious pantheon of Greek divinities is on a moral par with the God of Christianity in whom there is no shadow of turning. This mammoth disanalogy makes a great deal of difference when defending an intelligent theistic ethic, yet it is one she dispenses with by a wave of her hand. In fact, no bigger difference in theology can be imagined; one picture envisions capricious, finite, imperfect deities within the universe, the other the Ground of Being on whom everything depends for

5. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away* (New York: Pantheon, 2014), pp. 306–307.

its existence. This is why no discussion of morality and God is complete without a consideration of the entirety of the world, which helps explain our title. In fact, this recurring issue of God as absolute Creator, as Ground of Being, as locus of value, as should become increasingly clear, will be an integrating motif throughout this entire book. As such it will bear repetition in numerous forms. Its relevance is overlooked on pain of the sort of unwittingly superficial analysis that, unfortunately, motivates claims as diverse as “Atheists believe in just one less god than theists do,” to (echoing Goldstein) “Morality is based on reason, not divine commands,” to “Science reveals naturalism to be true,” to “Since evolution explains morality, the thesis of theism is rendered superfluous.”

This book is our effort to advance a cumulative abductive moral argument for God’s existence. Part of the challenge of making this case is considering the relative adequacy and explanatory power of a broad array of secular ethical approaches. We are committed to doing so and, in the process, according them the careful consideration, due diligence, and patient attention they deserve, at least to the extent we logically can. The book is built on the following guiding assumption: that the logical, semantic, and phenomenological features of morality constitute the desiderata of moral theory that invite reflection and careful scrutiny. They cry out for a solid account. Achieving the best explanation of such moral realities—facts ontological, epistemic, performative, and rational—is the purpose of our investigation. We wish to argue that classical theism and distinctively Christian theology provide the best explanation of morality, and will attempt to do so within the space constraints of one volume. This requires a subsidiary point of emphasis throughout the work, namely, that theology matters—both the tenets of classical theism on the one hand, and those of distinctively Christian theology on the other. Both sources of theological insight are crucial, and ultimately, on our view, integrally related.

In our previous volume, we spent the preponderance of our analysis defending theistic ethics against various objections. Only one chapter was explicitly devoted to a critique of naturalistic ethics. By the time we finished that book, we knew that various naturalistic efforts at explaining morality merited further analysis. So in this book, we intend to invert our earlier foci and spend much of our present effort explicating naturalism and ethical views espoused by naturalists and atheists and reserve most of what we have to say about the case in favor of theistic ethics for our final summative chapter. At that point we will bring to bear many of

the insights gleaned along the way in our assessment of naturalistic and secular ethical theory. Our conclusion will stand in diametric opposition to both interpretations of Nietzsche, for we will argue not just that God exists, but also that God is most certainly relevant in understanding and explaining morality.

Introduction to Part I

Antony Flew, one of the most famous philosophical atheists of the twentieth century, underwent a huge change of mind near the end of his life. Prior to the evolution in his thought that attracted the most press, he had earlier changed his mind on whether or not human beings are free in the libertarian sense; a longtime defender of a compatibilist understanding of human freedom, his perspective shifted and he began affirming a stronger sense of agency. Flew counted that decision as on a par with, if not more significant than, the one that came later, the one that set the blogosphere ablaze and made international news, including such memorable headlines as “Flew the Coop.”

Having argued forcefully but respectfully his whole career that the evidence led in the direction of atheism, he came to believe that the preponderance of evidence pointed instead to the existence of God—though more the deity of Aristotle than the God of Abraham. On the strength of scientific arguments for theism, especially biological and fine-tuning ones, Flew left atheism behind, but only to become a deist, not a classical theist.

Interestingly enough, he remained unmoved by the moral argument, C. S. Lewis’s variant as the salient example in his mind. Since a deist does not believe in an interventionist God, arguments for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus never quite brought Flew around, despite his having said that, if he became a theist, he would probably become a Christian because of the power of the case for the resurrection. Flew’s resistance, it would seem, was primarily rooted in his inability to affirm God’s moral attributes, and his difficulty overcoming this challenge explains his resistance to the moral argument for God’s existence. Moral arguments have the distinctive advantage of accentuating God’s moral attributes: his omnibenevolence, his impeccability, his goodness. If such arguments work, they make sense of a God who does more than merely contemplate himself; indeed, they dovetail and resonate perfectly with a God who pursues, who

would deign to intervene, become involved, stoop to save, die to bring life. Flew could not bring himself to believe this, as far as we know.

Flew was a firm moral realist and, later on, a believer in libertarian free will. Belief in moral regrets, moral responsibilities, moral rights, and moral freedoms, one would have hoped, might have enabled him to see the power of theism to explain such realities. He came to see the inadequacy of a naturalistic perspective when it came to the laws of nature, the existence of something rather than nothing, human consciousness, the efficacy of reason, and the emergence of life. He took all of these to be sound evidential considerations in favor of a divine Mind. Why not moral experience and the existence of a moral law as well?

As far as we can tell, the reasons for his resistance to the moral argument(s) were fourfold. One issue was that he was convinced biblical exegesis led to the view that God inexplicably predestines some to an eternal hell for lives they could not have avoided. A second issue was that if morality were to depend on God, God would be its justification, which would lead, at most, to prudential reasons to be moral, based on the prospects of punishment for failure to comply. A third issue was his concern over the equation of goodness and being, originally deriving from the teachings of Plato. One like Gottfried Leibniz, Flew argued, used this equation to derive a system of ethics on theistic foundations that is irremediably arbitrary. Things not at all recognizably good are to be called good anyway. This concern basically sounds like the classical arbitrariness and vacuity problem rooted in Ockhamistic voluntarism.¹ And a fourth

1. John Hare notes that our use of the language of Ockhamism doesn't bear historical scrutiny. In a review of *Good God*, he wrote in this regard, "Baggett and Walls take as their opponents naturalists on the one side and radical voluntarists, or 'Ockhamists,' on the other. But they have not understood Ockham properly. Their reading of him is, indeed, not unique to them. It is shared by the present pope, as they mention. But they should read the magisterial two-volume work of Marilyn Adams on Ockham, and even more, the work of Lucan Freppert, which she largely endorses. The present review is not the proper place to launch into an account of Ockham. I will say, simply, that I think his view is that the command to not love God, though its content is possible in itself, is pragmatically incoherent (a practical contradiction) because it cannot be disobeyed; this is because to disobey it is already to love God: 'The created will cannot elicit such an act during this time.' (*Quodlibetal Questions* III.14) A content can be non-contradictory in itself but contradictory as commanded. This seems to be the view of the preponderance of Ockham's texts on the issue, in which he teaches that to obey God and to love God are the same thing. A content can also be non-contradictory as commanded, but contradictory as commanded by God." <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24730-good-god-the-theistic-foundations-of-morality/> (accessed March 17, 2015). We acknowledge this with appreciation and admit we are using the locution of "Ockhamism" more colloquially to communicate radical voluntarism.

issue was perhaps the biggest of all, and in a sense the culmination of all of the above: the problem of evil. Flew's resistance to the moral argument makes good sense thus construed, and it was inevitable that until he thought of God as personal and moral, rather than merely intellectual and impersonal, his resistance to special revelation would remain intact and he would continue to be convinced by the teleological and cosmological arguments but not the moral one. Of course his resistance to the case for the resurrection would persist as well.

Flew's story underscores the need for moral apologetics. In our earlier book, as it happens, we attempted to address all of Flew's worries. We think the historical, biblical, and philosophical evidence weighs heavily against a Calvinistic soteriology, and we pointed out that most recent theistic ethicists, especially since Locke, have focused on the ontological grounding of moral facts in God, not the motivational and prudential incentive for morality provided by divine threats. We explicated and defended a theistic ethic that avoids Ockhamistic voluntarism, and we made the case that moral apologetics and the problem of evil are locked in a zero-sum battle; only one can survive, and we think the evidence for the success of moral apologetics is strong. We obviously can't reiterate all of the arguments from our previous book; our intention instead is to build on that book by extending our argument. We provided some positive reasons to embrace a theistic ethic in our earlier work, and we answered various objections to such a view. In this book we will spend more time offering positive reasons for theistic ethics by showing the weakness of its alternatives and the comparative strength of theistic ethics in explaining moral facts.

It would perhaps be useful to quickly reiterate an important series of distinctions we made in our earlier book by which we defended theistic ethics against various *Euthyphro*-inspired objections. In general, we defended a version of a divine command theory of the right and divine character or nature account of the good, arguing that such a view is philosophically powerful enough to evade the standard criticisms thought to count against theistic ethics. The seven categories of those distinctions are these: scope, semantic, modal, moral, epistemic, metaethical, and ontological. And respectively, the distinctions are *definition versus analysis*, *univocation versus equivocation*, *conceivability versus possibility*, *good versus right*, *difficulty versus impossibility*, *knowing versus being*, and *dependence versus control*. This set of distinctions helps answer a variety of objections to theistic ethics, thereby bolstering the case for moral apologetics. Such objections range from vacuity to arbitrariness to epistemic to normativity objections.

By the time we had finished *Good God*, though, we realized the need to expand our analysis of the reasons secular ethical theories ultimately fail. Our contention is not that such theories fail in every conceivable sense or that they offer nothing of value. To the contrary, we think, as classical theists, that we have every reason to expect secular ethics to get us some distance down the road of moral explanation. Exploring the reasons why this is true will be one of the tasks we undertake in the upcoming pages. However, we will contend and try to show that these theories ultimately fail to provide an adequate account of the full range of moral phenomena in need of explanation. Naturalism and ethics are poor dance partners, a bad fit, an odd couple. We in fact had flirted with calling this book *Unequally Yoked* to capture the incongruous pairing of naturalism and objective morality.²

Classical theism, in contrast, resonates nicely with objective morality and better explains it. We had pointed in rather cursory fashion at the reasons for this in the first chapter of our previous volume. What became clear by the time we finished that book, though, was that a more thorough, convincing, and decisive demonstration of the inadequacy of secular ethics is called for. In this book we thus set ourselves to just this task: To argue that ethical theories founded on the principles of naturalism and secularism are inevitably inadequate to sustain objective moral values, duties, and other moral realities. This book, unlike its predecessor, features for its dominant motif the claim that naturalism (or secularism more broadly) lacks sufficient resources to undergird moral theory.

When we speak of classical theism *explaining* morality, we are speaking of an “inference to the best explanation” (“IBE,” for short) case for theistic ethics. IBE is a kind of abductive reasoning identified by Gilbert Harman in 1965, although Harman’s definition of abduction did not quite match that of Charles Sanders Peirce’s characterization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Peirce, a contemporary of William James and the son of a famous Harvard mathematician, noted that all of us tend to infer explanations; we hypothesize in efforts to explain various phenomena we encounter. Such hypotheses then generate further

2. Incidentally, “unequally yoked”—besides being a biblical image—is the Internet name for Leah Libresco’s blog. She is an interesting and intelligent young lady. An active blogger, she was an outspoken atheist until she converted to Christianity a few years ago, thanks in large part to the power of a moral argument for God’s existence. In her case, she came to think that her naturalistic assumptions were the piece of her worldview that simply did not cohere with the rest, including her strong convictions about virtue ethics.

predictions that can be tested. Inferences to the best explanation have gone by various names—the method of hypothesis, hypothetic inference, the method of elimination, retrodiction, presumption—but Harman preferred IBE terminology because he thought it avoided most of the misleading suggestions of the alternative characterizations. “In making this inference one infers, from the fact that a certain hypothesis would explain the evidence, to the truth of that hypothesis,” and since various hypotheses could explain the evidence, it is important, he argued, to “reject all such alternative hypotheses before one is warranted in making the inference.”³ Abduction is not a form of deduction, where the premises aim at logically guaranteeing the conclusion as formal consequence; it is rather more like induction in this sense, where the conclusion is not guaranteed but still warranted.

IBE is an argumentative and inferential strategy found in history, science, philosophy, artificial intelligence, and other disciplines besides. It sets itself to explain a set of phenomena—Peirce thought it likely the phenomena in question was in some way surprising or complicated—in a way at once plausible, instinctive, and economical. Here is generally how the argument pattern works: We begin with a set of data points—states of affairs or established facts, the aforementioned phenomena in question—and construct a pool of possible explanation candidates. On the basis of a principled set of criteria one winnows the list down to the best explanation among the possibilities, and then hopefully achieves sufficient warrant to infer to it as the likely true explanation. The inference does not settle the matter, but produces new opportunities to subject the explanation to critical scrutiny to assess its effectiveness at providing further explanation of additional observations. Three important components of such an inference pattern, then, are (1) the set of salient facts requiring explanation, (2) the list of explanation candidates, and (3) the criteria by which we reduce the field of candidates down to the one that is best. Let’s say a word about each.

Set of Salient Facts Requiring Explanation: An abductive moral argument for God’s existence begins with important moral realities. These are an important starting point, and such realities will include ontological matters (moral facts), epistemic matters (moral knowledge), performative

3. Gilbert Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation,” *Philosophical Review* (1965) 74:89.

matters (moral transformation), and facts about morality and rationality (including the convergence of happiness and moral virtue). For now let us confine our attention to ontological matters, though subsequent chapters will be devoted to each variant.

The sorts of moral facts requiring explanation are objective, prescriptively binding moral duties, objective moral values, requisite moral freedom, ascriptions of moral responsibility, and other relevantly similar data of that ilk. Moral value pertains to the worth of a person or action, good or bad, whereas moral duties pertain to matters of rightness and wrongness, usually of actions. Goodness and obligations do not precisely overlap. In fact, as counterintuitive as it may seem, goodness is neither necessary nor sufficient for rightness. Cases where one must choose the lesser of two evils and is not just morally permitted but actually obligated to do so illustrate that goodness is not necessary for obligation. More typically, of course, the obligatory is also good in an important sense, but the fact that there can be obligations to do something in an important sense bad (taking life in war, for example) shows that goodness is not a necessary condition for rightness—even if no duty involves the requirement to do something irremediably evil. Nor is goodness sufficient for rightness, for there can presumably be ever so many good things to do that are not required. Helping out at the soup kitchen five days a week would be good, but it is not usually thought of as a duty. Such actions are called “supererogatory”: actions praiseworthy to do but not blameworthy not to do. At any rate, among the moral facts in need of explanation are both objective moral values and obligations.

Unlike Aquinas and the Catholic tradition, which finds a doctrine of supererogation in the biblical distinction between counsels and precepts, Protestant theologians, particularly Lutherans and Calvinists, have more commonly tended to oppose such a view. The nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, for example, expressed virulent opposition: “It is . . . the absolutely preposterous doctrine of supererogation which must be admitted if we adopt the creed of the Church of Rome in this matter. The idea is that a man may be more than perfect. . . . It supposes an impossibility. It supposes that a rational creature can be better than he ought to be; i.e. than he is bound to be.”⁴

4. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871), p. 758.

When John Wesley formed the Twenty-Five Articles of the Methodist Church, he adapted Article XIV of the Church of England's Articles of 1571, which said this regarding works of supererogation: "Voluntary works besides, over and above, God's commandments which they call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety. For by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for His sake than of bounden duty is required: Whereas Christ saith plainly, When ye have done all that are commanded to you, say, We be unprofitable servants."⁵

Claire Brown has usefully delineated the main Protestant objections to supererogation: (1) belief in supererogation is motivated by sin (in particular, pride, arrogance, or sloth); (2) the distinction between commands and counsels fosters immorality; (3) the distinction between commands and counsels is arbitrary; (4) the doctrine of supererogation contradicts scripture; and (5) the doctrine of supererogation leads to the abuse of indulgences. Brown goes on to defend supererogation, and ably so, from the stance of a virtue ethic.⁶

Our conviction that a class of supererogatory actions exists, to be clear, is not in any way connected with indulgences in Roman Catholicism; nor do we in any way affirm salvation by works. We simply mean to affirm the much less ambitious and commonsensical notion that we are not as human beings obligated to do absolutely every good of which we are capable. The insistence to the contrary strikes us as an odd view even for those of a Christian perfectionist bent. The intuitive distinction between the good and the right, at any rate, remains intact irrespective of one's views on supererogation.⁷

"Objective" moral values and duties contrast with subjectivist theories according to which morality is relativized, either to cultures, subcultures, or individuals, on the one hand, and of course any anti-realist moral stance according to which there are no moral facts at all, either objective

5. <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer/articles-of-religion.aspx#XIV> (accessed February 19, 2015).

6. Claire Michelle Brown, *Supererogation for a Virtue Ethicist*, <http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-01172011-121842/unrestricted/BrownCo12011D.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2014), pp. 12–18.

7. For a humorous illustration of a profound thinker ruminating on supererogation, consider Homer Simpson's words after finding out that he would need to paint the garage to procure entrance to heaven: "I just want to get in, I'm not running for Jesus."

or subjective, on the other. Ethical relativists, moral noncognitivists, and moral anti-realists would all be among those who would reject the moral phenomena in question that we propose to explain best by a theistic account. Their views are certainly worth considering, but we will not do so in this particular volume. We have touched on some such views before, and hope to do so again later, but not here.

Another way to get at the heart of morality is to identify some of its most intuitively plausible features based on our shared moral language and concepts. Scott M. James does just this in a nice analysis in his book introducing evolutionary ethics. For now it will suffice to quote him at length as he summarizes his observations:

What makes moral creatures moral apparently involves a number of things. The following seem to represent some conceptual truths about the making of moral judgments. (1) Moral creatures understand prohibitions. (2) Moral prohibitions do not appear to depend on our desires, nor (3) do they appear to depend on human conventions, like the law. Instead, they appear to be objective, not subjective. (4) Moral judgments are tightly linked to motivation: sincerely judging that some act is wrong appears to entail at least some desire to refrain from performing that act. (5) Moral judgments imply notions of desert: doing what you know to be morally prohibited implies that punishment would be justified. (6) Moral creatures, such as ourselves, experience a distinctive affective response to our own wrongdoing, and this response often prompts us to make amends for the wrongdoing.⁸

J. P. Moreland cuts the cookie in yet another way as he explicates what morality involves. He lists seven features of morally relevant intrinsic value and objective moral value as humans commonsensically know them to be. They are as follows: (1) the existence of objective value; (2) the nature of the moral law (violation of which produces guilt and shame); (3) the instantiation of morally relevant value properties (unlike entities knowable by scientific means); (4) the intersection of intrinsic value and human persons; (5) knowledge of intrinsic value and the moral law;

8. Scott M. James, *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 56.

(6) the nature of moral action (exercises of libertarian freedom in which an enduring self acts teleologically for duty's sake in such a way that the act is autonomous and not heteronomous in Kant's sense); and (7) an adequate answer to the question "Why should I be moral?"⁹ It is not our intention at this stage to beg questions by assuming as sacrosanct such a list, but it is one among other useful starting points that we will have occasion to discuss.¹⁰

List of Explanation Candidates: In order for theistic ethics to work, it needs to show itself capable of defending itself against various objections and it needs to commend itself for our belief. Among positive reasons to take it to be true is its superior explanatory power, specifically with respect to its ability to explain the full range of moral facts in need of explanation, such as objective moral values and duties. In order to make this case, the comparative cases need to be constructed for rival hypotheses, requiring a careful examination of a range of secular and naturalistic ethical theories vying for allegiance. From deontological to consequentialist theories, from evolutionary ethical accounts to social contract theories to secular virtue accounts—these are the pool from which we draw potentially viable alternative explanations of moral facts. This book will take the time to go through various representative theories in enough detail to show how and why such theories, by comparison to classical theism, fail to provide the best explanation of morality. Of course, the breadth and range of such secular theories are such that we inevitably can only initiate this discussion, not offer anything like a final word. In light of the ongoing, unfolding nature of abductive inferences, anyway, final words are hard to come by. But we do strive in our analysis to provide a broader and more cumulative discussion than most analyses currently on offer.

Narrowing Criteria: Abductive criteria for narrowing the field of explanation candidates down to one can vary, but here is one attempt at it: (1) explanatory power; (2) explanatory scope; (3) plausibility; (4) degree of "ad hoc-ness"; and (5) conformity with other beliefs. The more explanatory power and scope and the more plausibility and conformity with other beliefs an explanation has, the better an explanation it is. The less ad hoc (adjusted, contrived, artificial) the explanation, the better as well. The trick

9. J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 146–156.

10. Ibid.

is to subject all the explanation options to these tests in order to pick the one that is the best—and therefore most likely true—explanation.

Although IBE is a powerful and intuitive argumentative strategy, it is not without its critics. Alvin Plantinga has this to say about abduction:

We should note that inference to the best explanation isn't really inference; you aren't compelled by some rule of inference to accept a bad explanation of some phenomenon, even if that explanation is the best one you can think of. Suppose there are six candidates; suppose the most probable among them has a probability of .2. Even if that explanation is the best one, you will quite properly refuse to accept it as the truth of the matter.¹¹

The problem with inferences to the best explanation, the same problem that can afflict arguments constructed in Bayesian fashion—as Plantinga sees it—is that part of what makes an explanation good or bad is its probability. “So we are back at the antecedent probability of theism: whether theism is a good explanation of the phenomena depends in part on the antecedent probability of theism.”¹²

This should serve as a needed reminder of a few important points to bear in mind as we proceed. If we were to conclude that classical theism provides, on examination, the best explanation of morality, and even assuming there is widespread agreement on the salient facts in need of explanation and theism’s victory, what we can infer is limited in certain respects. First, perhaps morality increases the likelihood of theism but only by a marginal amount. Second, it should be said in such a case that the probability of theism has increased (by much or a little) *relative to morality*; in theory the probability of atheism could increase or decrease relative to other phenomena. (However, the success of the moral argument would decisively undercut the problem of evil, which tends to be counted as the best evidence against theism.) Third, that theism bests each individual secular ethical theory does not necessarily mean that it beats every combination of them; arguing it does requires additional work. Fourth, too much initial or a priori skepticism about theism (or objective morality for

11. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 223–224.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

that matter) could function to derail an abductive moral argument from the start. Fifth, all of these points are a useful reminder that the moral argument functions best evidentially in combination with various other pieces of natural theology and historical apologetics. Unlike the problem of evil, which tends to be a one-man show, the moral argument is just the star quarterback on a very talented team.

To accomplish the task before us, allow us to explain the structure of this book. It has three parts. Part I discusses naturalism in broad terms; we lay out what naturalism is, explore where it came from, and describe its salient features. We then highlight three takeaways from the cursory historical overview: a deflationary temptation, diversity among naturalists and secularists, and a third option beyond theism and materialism.

Then we spend time motivating an abductive moral apologetic, arguing that it has several advantages over a prominent example of a deductive variant much discussed of late; the culmination of that discussion will also, as it happens, serve as additional motivation for the second part of the book. We round out our general discussion of naturalism by exploring two important moral issues and their connection to naturalism: free will and a secular variant of the problem of evil. In *Good God*, we explained the way the problem of evil and the moral argument(s) are in diametric opposition, locked in a zero-sum game. We could have included moral and natural evil as data better explained by theism than atheism and put the third chapter into Part II. Instead, in light of their general nature, we use the discussion as a transition into the main argument of book. The mysteries at the heart of the problem of evil serve to make obvious the need for discussing issues of the good, the right, and the like undertaken in Part II.

The structure of Part II will be explained in greater detail later on, but, in brief, it is strategically designed to capture the fourfold moral argument this book advances. The four components are moral facts, moral knowledge, moral transformation, and moral rationality. In chapters 4–8 we take up each of these variants of the moral argument (moral facts are divided into two chapters: one on values, one on duties), underscoring the deficiencies of various secular attempts to explain them. The final chapter, constitutive of Part III, summarizes the positive case in favor of the superior explanatory power of theism generally and Christianity particularly in each area, and the cumulative case that results from combining all the points together.

I

Alone in the Cosmos

The Sea of Faith

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
But I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

MATTHEW ARNOLD (“Dover Beach”)

IN MANY INTELLECTUAL circles today, something like naturalism or materialism—the idea that the physical world exhausts reality—is the prevailing perspective, despite its minority standing in the larger culture and its relative scarcity throughout history. But in contemporary times, no small number of the leading and most influential thinkers the world over are guided, at least tacitly, by an essentially secularist perspective, a view that, at least in certain quarters, seems on the ascendancy. Many simply take naturalism as constituting the default position, a set of regulative and normative views taken to be fairly obvious or axiomatic, practically in no need of argument. As it is the more parsimonious and ontologically lean worldview, the burden of proof, they suggest, falls disproportionately on those who still subscribe to metaphysically bloated perspectives like classical theism or Platonism. Why such assumptions prevail, and what follows from their popularity, are the main concerns of this chapter, as we seek to set the stage for the discussion to come.

We wish to begin not only by acknowledging the obvious reality that atheism, secularism, and naturalism are positions held by many thoughtful and principled people, but also by emphasizing that we count many of them among our friends. Since most professing atheists and secularists are truth seekers, we consider them kindred spirits as together we embark on the human quest for knowledge and wisdom. We intend in this

book not to pigeonhole or stereotype adherents of these positions, nor to cast such views in a poor or uncharitable light. We aim rather to engage some of the best and brightest secular moral philosophers in a dialogue, and invite those among them willing to consider it to take another look at supernaturalism, as we ourselves look carefully at naturalistic and secular paradigms. We will attempt to conduct the dialogue specifically on the issue of morality.

This book is for a wide range of readers, but one important audience is those who have thought that philosophy and supernaturalism are at odds—those for whom philosophy has clipped the angel's wings and unwoven the rainbow of supernaturalism, but perhaps who still wonder whether there's more to life than is dreamt of in their philosophy. We suspect that if such thinkers came to see that the evidence for God's existence is strong, at least many of them would be happy to believe. It would provide the paradigmatic opportunity for the imagination and intellect to lock in passionate embrace. But they just so happen to think the evidence weighs decisively against theism. Although we don't see eye to eye with them on that issue, and wish to offer them food for thought to reconsider their views, we acknowledge that if someone is genuinely convinced that the ultimate constituents of reality are matter and energy without remainder, that the divine whirlwind is a product of fanciful imagination and wishful thinking, then he should, by all means, be true to his vision and, without apology, follow the evidence where it leads. In light of the difficulty of the questions involved, however, and the enormous implications involved, he should strive to keep an open mind just in case new evidence, or old evidence seen in a new light, provides reason to take another look. Sturdy commitment is consistent with epistemic humility and due respect for various opposing views.

In a recent online article by Massimo Pigliucci, who remains a skeptic, an atheist, and a humanist, we see an example of such epistemic humility. He laments some of the tendencies of the recent New Atheist movement which he identified with until recently. What has too often become par for the course within that community, he notes, is nasty invective, arrogant contention, public shaming, a strand of anti-intellectualism, a dismissal of philosophy, and, in the case of one like Sam Harris, a disregard for ethical theory. He cites Harris as writing, "I am convinced that every appearance of terms like 'metaethics,' 'deontology,' . . . directly increases the amount of boredom in the universe." Pigliucci adds that Michael Shermer builds

on Harris's point, emulating his anti-intellectualism, coming out with "yet another 'revolutionary' book about the science of ethics, predicated on an argument that had so many holes in it that I felt a bit embarrassed having to explain them in a public forum a couple of years ago."¹

Our point is hardly that all secular ethical treatises are bad; they most assuredly are not. But when such analyses are written by passionate partisans who don't dig deeply enough into the relevant material, they are more likely to feature ad hominem, non sequiturs, red herrings, and a neglect of important evidence, relevant literature, and careful distinctions. To his credit, Pigliucci wishes to distance himself from such trends and work instead toward "a true integration and a dialogue (as opposed to a shouting match) with the rest of society, when we will not need special organizations and dedicated meetings, because secularism, skepticism, and political progressivism (including feminism) will be part of the normal cultural landscape, embedded by default in ongoing discussions on how to make this a better world. That's where my target audience is now. I'd rather have a productive conversation with an intelligent Christian than a frustrating one with an obtuse atheist, and believe me, there is plenty of both out there."²

We share Pigliucci's hope for such fruitful exchanges, and also lament the unnecessary animus and contention on both sides of various contemporary debates. We are convinced there are people of good will on both sides of important and vexing philosophical questions, and a better discourse is possible than a zero-sum game in which participants go for the jugular and demonize interlocutors. Rather than adding to the cacophony and rancor, we hope this book will contribute to a civil dialogue featuring everyday decency, too often a rare commodity. Ideally we hope to give committed secularists pause as they consider the features of morality hard to square with their worldview, or the half-convinced additional evidence to ponder, but at the very least we can make clear the convictions we hold and some of the important reasons we do so.

To begin with, though, we need to better understand some of the reasons our secular friends hold the positions they do, which can help lay the foundation for a more fruitful exchange of ideas and cultivate a spirit of

1. <https://scientiasalon.wordpress.com/2015/05/11/reflections-on-the-skeptic-and-atheist-movements/>. Accessed May 20, 2015.

2. *Ibid.*

mutual respect and understanding. A modicum of historical context can help and will, despite its obvious limitations, suffice for present purposes.

The Ionian Enchantment

The purpose of this brief historical foray, as will be patently obvious, is not to be exhaustive, but rather to suggest just a few of the salient intellectual currents that eventually combined and culminated in the contemporary secular outlook among so many intellectuals, especially in the Western world. One way to sketch the narrative of naturalism is by adducing incipient movements toward such a view in the history of Western philosophy, starting with what E. O. Wilson has called the “Ionian Enchantment.” In starting here we emphasize that naturalism is not, as may be popularly assumed, an exclusively modern phenomenon. Rather, it has a pedigree that goes back to ancient times. Ionia proper comprised a narrow coastal strip from Phocaea in the north to Miletus in the south. Miletus was the homeland of Thales, whom Aristotle regarded as the first philosopher in the Greek tradition. Thales questioned received wisdom and endeavored to explain the world in rational terms, identifying its fundamental components. Most famously he held the world started from water, whereas Anaximenes would later argue everything in the world was composed of air, and Heraclitus fire. Such efforts at *compositionism* sparked the Enchantment of which Wilson speaks.

In the classical Greek philosophical tradition, Socrates, more than his student and biographer Plato (with his essentialism and instincts toward the transcendent), was the more parsimonious, less metaphysically ambitious, and perhaps the more epistemically modest of the two. The early dialogue *Euthyphro*, mentioned earlier, pivots away from the Greek gods. Plato’s student Aristotle rejected a Platonic picture of reality, a fact that often bolsters those interpreters of him as more earthly than heavenly minded. Epicurus followed Democritus and his atomist view, constructing a hedonistic ethical theory that identified the real good as the experience of pleasure and avoidance of pain, a far cry from participation in Platonic Forms. Epicureanism continued to hold great sway in Rome after the conquest of Greece, as did the ethical doctrines of Stoicism. In one extant work of the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, an epic philosophical poem, he waxed with eloquence and erudition about the sublimity of naturalistic philosophy.

The appeal of naturalism faded very much into the background, obviously, with the rise of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, and its dominance of Europe over the next several centuries. But one notable factor that gave a boost to naturalism was the uneasy relationship between reason and revelation in some Christian theologians. Some of the Reformers so strongly emphasized the corruption due to human sinfulness that reason was taken to be excessively untrustworthy and prone to error. The reliability of reason was similarly undermined by voluntarist strands in earlier medieval theology. The collective result was a perceived wedge driven between the deliverances of reason and those of revelation, providing impetus for a push toward a more secular approach that gives reason primacy.

But the pre-modern period that perhaps most portends the rise of naturalism is the Renaissance. Owing to its confluence of individualism, humanism, and dramatic proliferation of artistic creativity, the Renaissance is renowned not least for its expansive net of scholarship, art, and creative innovation—despite such horrors as the black plague and Hundred Years' War. Even as Saint Peter's Basilica and the Sistine Chapel channeled some of the explosion of creativity toward the church, the Renaissance marked the simultaneous decline of the church as a political power broker and cultural mythmaker. Montaigne is often cited as the chief exemplar of the mood of this age, concerned less with matters divine than with issues of self-knowledge and self-discipline, of tolerance and honesty, echoing themes resonant with Seneca, Cicero, and Plutarch. In short, the Renaissance is often touted as the point at which modern Western character finally arrived on the scene in its worldly curiosity, anti-authoritarianism, and confident rationality.

From the height of the Renaissance onward a number of factors converged to forge a more distinctly modern mindset. Currents both philosophical and scientific formed a wave of Enlightenment thought that eventually engulfed the Western world. Oceans of ink have been spilled chronicling this portion of the narrative, and it won't detain us here, except to emphasize how the mounting perceived conflict between religion and science wielded enormous influence, epitomized by names like Copernicus, Galileo, and, later, Darwin. Even today the Galileo affair, tendentiously rendered, remains in the popular mind a symbol of religious resistance to scientific advance and rational inquiry, and for many a rallying cry to embrace secularism and science, naturalism and reason.

Philosophical work marked a similar shift toward science as the paradigm of true knowledge. Francis Bacon's empiricism relegated theology to the arena of faith construed as epistemically inferior. The emergence of a Newtonian picture of the world was seen, notwithstanding Newton's own theism, as powerful evidence in favor of a mechanistic world, a world operating according to causal law rather than divine providence, one in which God is a needless hypothesis. Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* was predicated on a demystified view of the world in which moral philosophy involves taming the passions by reason; unreflective attachments to sectarian religion and debunked superstition are not relevant to the task. And in France, Baron D'Holbach and Julien Offray de La Mettrie began to interpret ethics along similar lines as rooted in feelings, principles, or laws that are themselves explicable in entirely naturalistic terms.

Writing about doubt, which A. N. Wilson calls the “Victorian disease,” Jennifer Michael Hecht says the period 1800–1900 was “easily the best-documented moment of widespread doubt in human history.”³ She claims that many of the doubters of the period were ready for the next chapter beyond skepticism, a constructive step, building a better world—feeding the poor, clothing the naked, tending the sick. Resources previously collected in the church coffers could now be better spent to ameliorate suffering and advance education.⁴ She calls this the century of “doubt’s bid for a better world,” a point echoed by Owen Chadwick’s Gifford Lectures that spoke of two sorts of “unsettlement” in the nineteenth century: a social process and an intellectual one. They merged, he argued, between 1860 and 1880, just the time leading up to Nietzsche’s publication of *Zarathustra*. Peter Watson argues that the evidence suggests that, since the 1880s, “people have continued to lose faith, and religion is evolving in ways that increasingly suggest a rearguard action.”⁵

Alexander Tille’s *From Darwin to Nietzsche*, published in 1895, emphasized Nietzsche’s dismissal of Christian ethics, socialism, and democracy, and made the case that Nietzsche’s fundamental insight was that people

3. Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt as History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation, from Socrates and Jesus to Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), p. 371.

4. Ibid.

5. Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live Since the Death of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), p. 29.

“did not possess equal worth.”⁶ Nietzsche himself predicted that it would take time for the implications of the death of God to sink in; it would not be at all surprising to him that his view remains both the minority position among secularists as well as the view incrementally yet ominously gaining momentum.

Before turning to the twentieth century, we must pause to highlight the role of Charles Darwin, whose groundbreaking *Origin of the Species* in 1859 has been interpreted by many as substantial evidence against theism, and has cast a formidable shadow ever since. There is little doubt that the emergence of evolution initially had a devastating effect in natural theology, seemingly displacing the need for an intelligent designer posited by teleological arguments. Evolution made atheism intellectually satisfying, and Darwin’s prominence in the narrative of naturalism can hardly be overstated. Efforts by evolutionary ethicists remain prominent today, and we will discuss them at some length. Part of the appeal of evolution is that it employs a sort of teleology (perhaps a quasi-teleology that connotes a semblance of meaning and purpose) without invoking God.⁷

At any rate, among those Darwin influenced were a cluster of thinkers whose intellectual output and innovation in philosophy at the turn of the century was simply prodigious, and to them we now turn.

The Pragmatists and the Twentieth Century

John Dewey, William James, George Santayana, Charles Peirce, and a few other luminaries were an empirically minded group of scholars who founded perhaps the most important indigenous American philosophical movement: pragmatism. In a truly remarkable span of several decades, a distinctive school of thought crystallized and emerged that, ever since, has exerted a powerful influence on the intellectual landscape of America and Europe. This talented group was predominantly of a naturalistic mindset, and an important portion of subsequent naturalists have retained a pragmatist bent, notable examples being W. V. O. Quine and Richard Rorty.

6. Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), p. 124.

7. Darwin wrote that “any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience.” Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1882 [1871]), p. 98.

Dewey's firm conviction as a pragmatist was that ethics should be less concerned about transcendent, invariant, or exceptionless principles and unbending rules than workable solutions to the growing challenges that human beings face. It's been argued that the fact that his life spanned the years from the Civil War to the Cold War—a remarkable period of social change and upheaval—can perhaps make sense of the need he saw for moral theory to address the pressing practical needs so many significant changes introduced. One of his reservations about morality and ethics classically and theoretically construed was its insensitivity to the dramatic vagaries and vicissitudes of history. Traditional morality, too consumed with the past, had become, *inter alia*, reactionary, unreflective, preoccupied with a misguided quest for static moral goals and guidelines. This had the regrettable effect of rendering morality impractical; practicality, service of the real needs of persons, should be its primary goal, not theoretical dexterity or rational efficacy. As one of the original thirty-four signatories of the first *Humanist Manifesto*, Dewey aimed at reconceiving ethics along these eminently practical lines.

The naturalism of Dewey and Santayana is well known, but, interestingly enough, some have argued that even that “adorable genius” (to use Whitehead’s phrase) William James was less committed to theism than often thought. Echoes of a reductionist interpretation of James occasionally reverberate in the literature, construing his philosophy of religion as essentially evaluative and, at least in part, a species of moral hypotheses more concerned with our *hope* for the supernatural than about its *reality*. E. Abegg once wrote that the function of “support for ethical ideals provides justification of hope for the supernatural. . . . James’s pragmatic arguments find their appropriate intellectual formulation in a religion of hope for the supernatural, not of belief in the supernatural.”⁸ Peter Watson characterizes James’s Gifford Lectures (that would be published as *Varieties of Religious Experience*) as James, respectfully but forcefully, telling the “stark truth about religion,” namely, that it is possible religion is a disguise for pathology; that at root religion is about emotionality; that what matters more than whether God exists is whether belief in God yields pragmatic benefits; and that, as Watson puts it, “religion is a natural phenomenon, rooted in our divided self; . . . that advances in understanding the subconscious might well

8. E. Abegg, “Religion as Hope for the Supernatural,” *Sophia* 4:31 (1965): 31.

lead to a better understanding of the central uneasiness that we have within us.”⁹

More generally, the pragmatists were averse to the notion of absolute, invariant truths. Ideas for them were tools to be used for practical purposes. The Platonic aspiration to unearth deeper truths beneath misleading appearances was not one they shared. They saw the quest for an unchanging ahistorical human nature as a futile one. They thought change more important than stability, not to mention more ubiquitous, and they saw philosophy as an instrument of change. Truth in terms of anything like *certainty* was thought beyond our ken; they tended to prefer locutions like “warranted assertability” instead. In a Darwinian world, change and lack of certitude are the order of the day. Applied to human beings, such emphases had important implications. Pragmatism tended to eschew the idea of essential natures, including human nature. This marked a departure from both Greek philosophy and the main monotheisms, and adeptly anticipated certain subsequent existentialist themes. Humanity was now to be thought of as open-ended, rather than made up of an unchanging and eternal essence.

This enabled them to shift the focus to the future—what human beings, still evolving, can become. Perhaps these ideas have by now become part of the air we breathe, and why, even today, broaching the topic of an objective “meaning of life” in conversation is typically perceived as a joke, inviting an eye roll and a crack or two about Monty Python or the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* rather than serious, sober reflection. At most it tends to elicit a concise quip about how people make their own meanings. Anti-essentialism shifts the focus from mind to language and from transcendental stories to empirical ones. The human condition is to be *created*, not *discovered*. Moreover, as Richard Rorty later put it, “You cannot aim at moral perfection, but you can aim at taking more people’s needs into account than you did previously.”¹⁰ Moral perfection in previous generations was a genuine aspiration, thought feasible by the operative grace of God, so perhaps what we see here is Rorty’s effort at a secular substitute.

The relentless march toward a more secular understanding of the human condition, even a thoroughgoing naturalistic conception of meaning and morality, continued throughout the twentieth century,

9. Watson, *The Age of Atheists*, pp. 58–59.

10. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 83.

which produced a number of noted philosophical naturalists, including Quine, Rorty, Sidney Hook, and Wilfred Sellars. Such philosophers busied themselves naturalizing philosophy—Quine in epistemology, for example. In the process, they tended to tear down distinctions between scientific and philosophical methods. In relatively recent years, the aforementioned “New Atheists” have come to the fore, notably Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, adding a new twist to the stage: a level of zeal and almost evangelical fervor in support of their cause. Inebriates of the Ionian enchantment, they seem intent on reading a history such as we have been sketching in cursory fashion as the triumphant liberation of rationality from the shackles of religious superstition to enlightened liberation. As we saw with Pigliucci, though, they don’t speak for all secularists and atheists.

The Deflationary Fallacy

That cursory sketch, again, was not meant to be exhaustive, only suggestive, and it highlights for us three points we wish to emphasize in the remainder of this chapter. First, we need to raise a problem for the narrative by pointing out again the danger of what we call the “deflationary fallacy,” something against which we need to guard. Second, it is important to note that the narrative features numerous proverbial forks in the road where naturalists of diverse stripes emerged depending on what they took the disparate implications of their naturalism to be. And third, beyond the most significant divide we will identify between secularists and naturalists, there’s another alternative that we wish to discuss at some length before getting on with our main discussion. Let’s begin with the deflationary fallacy, and the final two sections will deal with naturalistic divisions and that third option, respectively.

Part of the charm of truncated narratives like we just considered is the way that simple assumptions on which quite a bit rides are seamlessly woven into their thread, assumptions that need unmasking and exposure if we are going to avoid being misled. It is natural for proponents of an agenda to skew the telling of the tale in various respects, perhaps half-unwittingly, and naturalists are by no means alone in this regard. Certain features of the story as recorded do in fact make more understandable how predictable, perhaps even inevitable, the emergence of contemporary naturalism was, and how easily various of its assumptions could

be appropriated by the popular mindset and taken as normative, even commonsensical. Nevertheless, it is useful to texture a few wrinkles into so uniform a tale, because naturalist narratives occasionally exhibit the tendency by certain theorists and historians to arrogate to the province of their guiding story something, or someone, not properly thus relegated and confined.

To illustrate, consider the pre-Socratics. Enlisting to the cause of naturalism those whose work tends to be saturated with a sense of the divine remains a stretch. Or take the use of the *Euthyphro* as a boon to naturalism. Plato thought the divine arena to be the realm of the truly real. The same certainly can't be said of this shadowy physical world we currently inhabit. Whatever fanciful conjectures we might develop about a skeptical Socrates—who, for what it's worth, saw himself on something of a divine mission—recall the telling fact that the pragmatists felt the need to intentionally distance themselves from the ontological richness of Platonism.

Similarly, consider the way Aristotle privileged the life of contemplation by linking it with the divine. Martha Nussbaum casts such an attempt as an exception to the rule, saying he did this only once, “in a passage that does not fit with its context and that is in flat contradiction with several important positions and arguments” of the book as a whole.¹¹ John Hare’s reply, however, is more than a little telling: “The one passage is the conclusion of the whole work . . . and she proposes excluding it as inserted in [its] present position by someone else.”¹² This seems to be an example of Nussbaum trying too hard to domesticate Aristotle to categories she’s personally more comfortable with, enlisting to her cause a major figure by paying too little heed to inconvenient data. The effort to explore how well a figure’s ideas comport with one’s own is an altogether legitimate exercise and potentially fruitful, but this does not license strategic neglect of important counterevidence.

Casting the Stoics as allies of naturalism is also rather difficult in light of what the Stoics themselves said about the centrality of theology in their ethical thought. Epictetus, for example, wrote that “the chief doctrine of philosophers is quite brief. It takes very few words to say that a human

11. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 375.

12. John Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 19.

being's purpose is to follow the gods, and that the nature of good is a proper use of appearances."¹³ In Epictetus's time, the main Stoic view apprehended the universe as run by a benevolent intelligence, a rational providence ultimately productive of good.¹⁴ Richard Tarnas puts it like this: "In the Stoic view, all reality was pervaded by an intelligent divine force, the Logos or universal reason which ordered all things. Man could achieve genuine happiness only by attuning his life and character to this all-powerful providential wisdom. To be free was to live in conformity with God's will, and what mattered finally in life was the virtuous state of the soul, not the circumstances of the outer life."¹⁵

We will dub such attempts to co-opt and appropriate a thinker (or insight) to the cause of one's worldview, despite compelling counterevidence, a deflationary analysis. It is an easy trap to fall into, but sometimes difficult to undo the knots on which the mistake is predicated. A particularly powerful example of such a mistake is the aforementioned way some enlist William James to the naturalist and secular cause. Richard Rorty, for example, has offered a "quasi-Jamesian position" on the philosophy of religion. He argues that James's characterization of the religious hypothesis betrayed James's own better instincts. For it "associates religion with the conviction that a power not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good rather than with the hope that we ourselves will do such good."¹⁶ Using John Dewey's three stages of the development of the religious consciousness, Rorty points out that James's definition of religion remained at the second stage by retaining the notion of something nonhuman which is nevertheless on the side of human beings.

Confused by appeals to the supernatural, Rorty is convinced that, in Whitmanesque moods, James "could identify this wider self [of religion] with an Americanized humanity at the farthest reach of the democratic vistas. Then he could (to paraphrase the title of his father's book) think of Democracy as the Redeemed Form of God."¹⁷ Thus, had James been

13. Quoted in Tom Morris, *The Stoic Art of Living: Inner Resilience and Outer Results* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), p. 83.

14. Ibid.

15. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our Worldview* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 76

16. Richard Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 96.

17. Ibid., p. 99.

true to his pragmatic self, Rorty asserts, his philosophy of religion would have featured “a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community.”¹⁸ Such a philosophy of religion would have no need to appeal to the supernatural or to look beyond life to an afterlife; it need only look beyond the human past to the human future. Pragmatic philosophers have to get along, Rorty suggests, without personal immortality, providential intervention, and the risen Christ. Reformulators of and commentators on James such as Rorty thus intimate and closely approximate a deflationary analysis of James.

Some decades ago, Donald H. Bishop, noting that twentieth-century humanism, as encapsulated in *The Humanist Manifesto*, rejected the dogmas of orthodox Christianity, credited James as an important initiator of this movement, insisting that James only reluctantly used the term ‘God’: “James was a leader of the revolt against the speculative philosophy and orthodox Christianity which dominated the nineteenth century. His pragmatic philosophy was a beginning in the freeing of twentieth century man from their dogmas and absolutes. He could only initiate such a movement, in part because he was himself a product of that Absolutism.”¹⁹ Bishop maintained that humanists of the twentieth century “continued and extended James’s views.”²⁰

Such arguments are interesting and not without merit. Nevertheless, as one of us has argued at length elsewhere, careful analysis reveals that they fall into the deflationary trap. Rehearsing the whole case here is not necessary for our purposes, but the curious are encouraged to look at the detailed argument against a deflationary analysis of James.²¹

18. Ibid., p. 96.

19. Donald H. Bishop, “William James and the Humanist Manifesto,” *Religious Humanism* 6, no.1 (1972): pp. 34, 38.

20. Ibid., p. 38.

21. David Baggett, “On a Reductionist Analysis of William James’s Philosophy of Religion,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28, no. 3 (2000): 423–448. Ironically, both monistic absolutism and humanistic (quasi-)religion have strong motives for interpreting James’s philosophy of religion reductively. The monists criticize such reductionism and distance themselves from James, while the humanists praise his reductionism and enlist him to their cause. They both agree that all versions of supernaturalism are absolutist and that James rejected absolutism, so they both conclude that James should be interpreted reductively. Of course, they disagree about the merits of absolutism: the humanists heap scorn on it while the monists wholeheartedly embrace it. Either way, though, since James renounced absolutism, he is interpreted as reducing religion to morality. James indeed flatly rejected absolutism, but we

So our first bit of commentary on the narrative of naturalism is that, whenever telling such a story, vigilance is needed to avoid being too selective and strategic in the choice of relevant details to accentuate. Caution is needed, too, when we attempt to cross hermeneutical gaps and extended time periods, potentially drawing conclusions stronger than the evidence warrants.

Forks in the Road

This book will use words like “atheistic,” “secular,” and “naturalistic” as largely interchangeable, but at points we will need to disambiguate. Take an ethical realist, for example, who doesn’t believe in God, but who does believe in synthetic *a priori* moral facts that are not reducible to natural properties. Such a person would be a secularist and an atheist, but not a naturalist. So we will usually refer to “secular ethics” in a broad enough way to encompass ethical views of atheists whether they are naturalists or, as in the case just described, Platonists; and at other times we will appeal to more fine-grained distinctions as the need arises.

This point furnishes a useful reminder of an important fact that needs to be intentionally kept in mind, which is the second take-away from our historical sketch: not all secular thinkers agree, so they hardly speak with one voice. They not only see the world differently from the way theists do; they also often see the world differently from other atheists, often profoundly so. Regarding ethics, for example, there is a gaping divide among atheists. One significant set of atheists stands in the tradition or at least vicinity of Nietzsche, thinking that the death of God entails an inversion of values, spells the end of objective duties, and disposes of sentimental rhetoric about human equality. For them a world in which there is no God is very different from a world in which there is. God’s existence would be a truly significant metaphysical state of affairs, on their view, so God’s non-existence is an equally momentous matter, and there is no sugarcoating or domesticating it. If God does not exist, the horizon is wiped clean and everything is different, and that most certainly applies to morality.

resist the premise shared by monists and (secular) humanists alike that all supernaturalism or genuine theism must be absolutist. James himself denied this premise in no uncertain terms, considering historical Christianity to be an example of nonabsolutist supernaturalism. The denial of this premise allowed room in James’s philosophy of religion for religious expression that is neither monistic nor reductionist.

A second set of atheists does not see itself in or around the tradition of Nietzsche at all; these are the tenacious adherents of the Enlightenment project that sees the death of God as consistent with metaphysical business as usual. They find anything remotely resembling moral nihilism anathema, and often go to considerable pains to distance themselves from Nietzsche and his ilk to avoid any appearance of guilt by even remote association. God can be eliminated from the equation, on their view, without losing much of anything at all. We are still free, and life can still be fully meaningful. Humanistic and even many religious values remain in place, and morality retains its objective authority. Vincent Bugliosi, in his *Divinity of Doubt*, writes that “morality, thank you, can stand very well on its own two feet. It is autonomous and self-sufficient and never needs religion or anything else to prop it up.”²²

This is of course only a rough way to categorize atheists and their ethics—nevertheless, this broad distinction remains, at least at first approximation, a very important divide among secular thinkers. Regarding morality, it goes to show that speaking of “secular ethics” is irremediably ambiguous. The differences between an act-utilitarian atheist and a committed secular anti-realist are stark indeed. The relevance of such distinctions to the project of this book is quite evident. Originally we had intended to discuss and critique secular ethics *per se*, but in the earliest stages of the project we realized the need to devote a whole book to *secularists who retain belief in objective moral facts*, which is this book, and hold in abeyance our treatment of moral anti-realists and skeptics until a later volume. Despite the fact that they all reside in the category of “atheists,” their ethical stances are night and day.

This chapter quickly traced several key historical reasons why atheists divided on the moral question, some taking the trajectory to nihilism, either with joy or sadness, others retaining their moral objectivism, some with ease and others with difficulty. This divide among secularists between moral realists and moral nihilists can be seen on numerous concrete questions as well. For example, among other pre-Socratics adduced as forerunners of naturalism, however indistinctly or inchoately, was Democritus, pupil of Leucippus, who devised a naturalistic-sounding theory of matter. Democritus is named by some as the “father of science,” not least owing

22. Vincent Bugliosi, *Divinity of Doubt: The God Question* (New York: Vanguard Press, 2011), p. 223.

to the fact that his atomism did not rely on teleology to account for the appearance of order in the world, a cosmos rather than chaos.

Debate on this matter of *teleology* continues today among secularists, particularly the question of whether or not human beings themselves have a *telos*, a goal or end toward which they are aimed. This is a vexed question among secular thinkers. The relevance of teleology to ethics is plain, but atheists are often divided on it, some arguing that it still makes perfect sense to speak in such terms, usually attired nowadays in evolutionary array, others eschewing the whole idea as a disposable vestige of Jewish and Greek influences.

Or take the rise of science rooted in the Middle Ages that, paradoxically in the minds of some, featured a growing interest in natural causes of various phenomena. The rise of science might easily transmogrify into a philosophy of science inimical to a theistic worldview, as formal and final causes are replaced by efficient ones and naturalist explanations supplant religious ones. Some saw then, as some see now, in science itself, a new mythmaker, an exciting and effective way to understand reality and unearth hidden truth, something almost numinous and worthy of our reverence. Other naturalists sensed, and still do, that science makes for a bland substitute for the gods, a myopic view of reality, a lamentable recipe for disenchanting the world and making us despair of finding the answers we seek about meaning and morality. Peter Watson attributes the success of such “Jeremiahs” as Dostoevsky, T. S. Eliot, and Samuel Beckett in capturing the popular imagination to the fact that horror claims all the best tunes. In particular, he notes that these literary giants of the modern period have all painted vivid mental pictures of the bleak scientific world resulting from God’s departure.²³

The question of human nature—what it is, whether there even is such a thing—is a profound point of contention among naturalists, as we noted. While some continue to affirm its existence and determinate content, notably secular humanists, others, such as the pragmatists, are altogether skeptical of the very notion and consider it another dispensable vestige from the past. An even starker example of the gulf between naturalists is that which divides nihilists who reject the idea that human beings possess intrinsic worth from those Enlightenment thinkers for whom such a denial is tantamount to sacrilege.

23. Peter Watson, *The Age of Atheists*, p. 8.

It is therefore unsurprising that such differences showcase a recurring divide on ethics. On the one hand, one contingent of atheists, although they don't believe that God exists, finds this lamentable. They might say, echoing Sartre, that they find it embarrassing that God does not exist, for "there disappears with him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it."²⁴ Or they might echo the sentiment of J. L. Mackie, who was convinced that moral properties and relations would fit well into a theistic world, but constitute a poor fit in an atheistic world, and was led thereby to an entrenched moral skepticism. On the other hand, a competing set of atheists think that God is irrelevant to ethics, even if, counterfactually, God were to exist! They take this to be the import of the *Euthyphro* Dilemma, Plato's preemptive riposte.

This is just a smattering of specific but significant examples of the larger ideological and inner tension among secularists and atheists, between those who retain objective moral convictions and those who don't. Again, this book will devote its attention to a critical scrutiny of the secular moral objectivists, saving a treatment of the nihilists, constructivists, relativists, and anti-realists for a later book.

Mind and Cosmos

Before moving on, we wish to look at a third possibility, neither a Nietzschean nihilist nor a contented ethical naturalist. Thomas Nagel, an atheist, has come to think there are chinks in the naturalistic armor, its ability to ground ethics among them, but he still resists the theistic alternative, offering another possibility. We propose to consider and subject to some critical scrutiny what Nagel has to say in his book *Mind and Cosmos*, explaining a bit of what befuddles Nagel, and then exploring his resistance to theism to solve the problems he sees with the "materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature."

Nagel offers an alternative worldview to that of materialism and theism, so perhaps a quick word is in order about what a worldview is. Among other things, it's an explanatory hypothesis, which is to say that one of its most important functions is the task of providing an explanation of

24. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialist Ethics," in *Classic Philosophical Questions*, ed. James Gould (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 180. Sartre later renounced this earlier essay and tried, we think unsuccessfully, to provide more objective grounds for ethics.

facts, of reality, of the way it actually is. J. P. Moreland writes, “Indeed it is incumbent on a worldview that it explain what does and does not exist in ways that follow naturally from the core explanation commitments of that worldview.”²⁵ Such explanations range over causal, epistemic, and metaphysical issues. A worldview is an expansive way of looking at ourselves and the world, pertaining to the big picture, ultimate reality, and our place within it.

In *Mind and Cosmos*, and in numerous places in his previous work, Nagel wishes to suggest several reasons that theism is not a *live option* for him, to use a phrase made famous by William James.²⁶ He does not seem to intend many of his criticisms to be more than suggestive, much less decisive; nonetheless, in light of the strength of his conviction that theism is not a viable option, we would like to spend a bit of time identifying and assessing the criticisms he mentions.

Nagel does not seem averse to characterizing his resistance to theism as something of a bias. He is rather transparent that theism is not a reasonable alternative for him personally. He seems to leave open the possibility that others may find it to be so, but he himself, he says, has not been blessed with the *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga’s work in epistemology employs this notion, borrowed from the writings of John Calvin, to refer to the idea that God has made his reality known to people in a direct fashion apart from discursive inference.²⁷ Nagel, though, claims to have no such sense, however inchoate. The thesis of theism strikes him rather as a dead option—perhaps akin (this is our example, not his) to the difficulty if not impossibility for a Christian to endorse reincarnation or karma.

It is important to emphasize the irenic way in which Nagel conveys this impression. There is nothing overtly tendentious or dismissive about his view toward theists in general, despite his own rejection of theism and incredulity at some of its tenets. In fact, he goes out of his way to express gratitude for certain theistically motivated advocates of intelligent design—lauding them as iconoclasts—for raising important questions

25. J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 3.

26. Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

27. See Plantinga’s trilogy on Warrant. *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and pointing out salient limitations of naturalism. His recent review of Plantinga's latest book is exceedingly fair.²⁸ And he admits that plenty of thinkers, on seeing the limitations of naturalism, might naturally gravitate toward theism as the superior explanation of various important aspects of the human experience—a few of which we shall mention below. Nagel's fair-mindedness and collegial tone are laudable, refreshing, and a poignant contrast with the contentious animus of the New Atheists whose strident dismissiveness of their dialogical interlocutors bespeaks a troubling lack of intellectual accountability. Nagel does not come across as divisive and partisan, but rather as a scrupulously honest philosopher sincerely trying to understand reality in light of his atheism and the severe difficulties naturalism faces in attempting to explain important phenomena that he is unwilling to renounce.

His book, to express it in broad outline, argues that various features of the human condition—value, meaning, cognition, consciousness, agency—reside beyond the ability of naturalism to account for. The thesis is not a new one, although what is most striking about Nagel's book is that he is an atheist admitting the limitations of naturalism. Usually such criticisms are lodged by theists, like Moreland, who, some years ago, published his book *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*. Moreland argued specifically that consciousness, free will, rationality, personhood, objective morality, and intrinsic value are unable to be sustained by a naturalistic worldview. Ironically enough, in an appendix Moreland discussed Nagel at length, specifically the “dismis-
sive strategy” Nagel employed in a 1997 book—a strategy that attempted to undercut, among other things, a theistic account of reason.²⁹ For present purposes, though, it is important to see that Nagel and Moreland agree that naturalism is ill-equipped to explain important features of reality.

Let us take value as a paradigmatic example to illustrate their point. The last chapter in Nagel's (and Moreland's) book treats the question of values generally, ethics more particularly. In seeking an adequate explanation of value (as he did for the other items on his list), Nagel divides the question into the constitutive issue concerning what value is all about and

28. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. Nagel published his review of Plantinga's book in “A Philosopher Defends Religion,” *The New York Review of Books* 59 September 27, 2012.

29. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the historical question of how it could come about that creatures like us could recognize objective value and be motivated by it. Causal historical accounts, he argues, inevitably are problematically reductionist, leaving out important and ineliminable parts of the picture. Historical explanations, such as those offered by theists, could indeed help explain much of what needs explanation here, but Nagel nonetheless rejects it for reasons to be discussed below. Instead, he opts for a nonintentional teleological explanation, something in the vicinity of the ideas of Aristotle, he thinks. Although he admits he is not entirely sure such an explanation makes sense, it is the direction he thinks is most likely to prove fertile. What he remains adamant about is that subjectivist and eliminativist (anti-realist) accounts, which are entirely consonant with naturalism, are beyond his ability to embrace psychologically, involving too prohibitive a price and too big an affront to common sense. “The teleological hypothesis,” he writes, in contrast, “is that these things may be determined not merely by value-free chemistry and physics but also by something else, namely a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them.”³⁰ The question as to which alternative is best comes down, he thinks, to a matter of relative plausibility.

Nagel, of course, admits that his notions of nonintentional teleology—a universe coming to life, coming into an ability to recognize itself, a view that resonates in certain respects with C. D. Broad’s view of the mind in nature and with Bergson’s picture of creative evolution—may well, in today’s intellectual climate, strike many readers as implausible, in the same way that materialism and theism strike him.³¹ At any rate, although much of what Nagel is suggesting here is not altogether new, in the contemporary discussion of, say, value and reality, it represents a fourth option after three well-rehearsed ones, which are as follows: naturalists confident in moral realism, like Nagel, but who, unlike Nagel, retain the hope that secular ethical theory will eventually suffice to capture what is distinctive about value; naturalists who, like Nagel, see naturalism as in principle unable to explain important aspects of value and who, unlike Nagel, thus reject moral realism; supernaturalists who remain staunch moral realists,

30. Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*, p. 123.

31. Nagel cites C. D. Broad’s *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge, 1925), pp. 81–94, and Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911).

like Nagel, but who, unlike Nagel, identify theistic foundations for morality. Nagel agrees and disagrees with all of these camps. Let us call his view “teleological emergentism.” With respect to value, (1) this is a realist perspective affirming objective value, (2) it sees that naturalism cannot account for such realism, and so (3) it rejects naturalism. In its place, though, (4) Nagel steadfastly resists the theistic hypothesis, gesturing instead in this other direction—a view of the universe as somehow having had this teleological direction latent within it, rendering the emergence of consciousness, value, and the like more than just wild coincidence.

Assessing the merits of his alternative proposal is a task for another day; for now, our question is simply why Nagel retains so strong a bias against theism, a bias that goes beyond his admission that he is not blessed with a sense of God’s reality. On our reading, he identifies several reasons to explain his philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic aversion. It is worth noting what they are, because classical theists have some important points to emphasize in reply. If the discussion is to proceed by more than merely citing one’s biases, but rather by a genuine, careful assessment of relative plausibilities, it is important that Nagel’s concerns about theism be forthrightly addressed.

To this end, let us identify the reasons he adduces for skepticism about theism. His quest for adequate explanation functions with a few strictures, one of which is antireductionism, and another is the insistence that certain things cannot be explained as merely accidental. Perhaps most important, however, is “the ideal of discovering a single natural order that unified everything on the basis of a set of common elements and principles.”³² In his view, both Cartesian dualism and classical theism fall short of this ideal, failing to achieve the single natural order to which Nagel aspires. Theists who appeal to the miraculous are attempting to explain features of the world by divine intervention. Since this is not part of the natural order, it is beyond where he is willing to go. Is this merely his bias, or a reason for rejecting the theistic hypothesis? If we were to attempt to make it into a reason, the logic might go something like this: divine interventions seem to represent a breakdown in explanation, an unnecessary ad hoc add-on, a theological addition to the picture that is indulgent and foreign. This is why Nagel’s earlier aversion seems aptly characterized as rooted in something aesthetic: he seems to be operating on the assumption that

32. Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos*, p. 7.

there is something explanatorily suspect about theism and the miraculous from the start. At any rate, he is unable to countenance it, and he suspects in today's intellectual milieu appeals to theism will largely be seen as troublesome.

Call it a mere bias if you will, but Nagel's concern here seems to be that an adequate explanation, to avoid appearances of being ad hoc or ontologically indulgent or something else, needs to be integrated. Its parts cannot just be slapped together in haphazard and unprincipled fashion, but must truly inform each other and combine into an organic whole. God's transcendence or the disruption of the natural order by miracles or something of the kind seems to strike him at a deep level as incongruent with this constraint imposed by integration. Although we do not share his reservations here, for reasons we will soon explain, we can empathize with his concern to a degree and can feel some of the force of his sentiment. It is this issue of integration in particular, in fact, that we wish to explore further below. First, though, let us briefly review some of Nagel's other reasons for rejecting the supernatural.

A recurring theme of Nagel's is that mind must somehow be central to the story of reality—not just an accidental product fortuitously arising billions of years into the narrative, but something that somehow guided the process from the start. Theism accomplishes such a feat impeccably, of course, but Nagel insists that this does not help. For he writes, “So long as the divine mind just has to be accepted as a stopping point in the pursuit of understanding, it leaves the process incomplete, just as the purely descriptive materialist account does.”³³ This then is another reason for his rejection of the theistic hypothesis: its alleged incompleteness in making God, in this case, a stopping point. At this point plenty of classical theists would be entitled to balk, of course, since God seems to be a natural stopping point indeed, a Being whose existence is necessary, the One who is, in fact, the very ground of all being. If anyone or anything is entitled to be a legitimate stopping point, is this not it? Nagel admits (or at least intimates) that, unlike the nomological laws of physics, God's existence is more plausibly thought of as metaphysically necessary. And even though theism accommodates Nagel's insistence that mental phenomena must be attributed to the working of a comprehensive mental source, he still finds

33. *Ibid.*, 21.

theism no more credible than materialism as a comprehensive world view. But why?

According to Nagel, “Theism does not offer a sufficiently substantial explanation of our capacities, and naturalism does not offer a sufficiently reassuring one.”³⁴ The problem with naturalism construed reductionistically is that it fails to undergird our confidence in the deliverances of reason, since reason itself is explicated in a way that casts doubt on its ability to uncover the truth (an issue we will return to later). The problems identified here for theism are that it fails to provide an adequate explanation. It “amounts to the hypothesis that the highest-order explanation of how things hang together is of a certain type, namely, intentional or purposive, without having anything more to say about how that intention operates except what is found in the results to be explained.”³⁵ Nagel continues by writing that “a theistic explanation will inevitably bring in some idea of value, and a particular religion can make this much more specific, though it also poses the famous problem of evil.”³⁶ He then mentions the difficulty of believing in God, and then claims that the disadvantage of theism as an answer to the desire for comprehensive understanding is that it does not offer explanation “in the form of a comprehensive account of the natural order. Theism pushes the quest for intelligibility outside the world.”³⁷ Thus, a theistic self-understanding

would not be the kind of understanding that explains how beings like us fit into the world. The kind of intelligibility that would still be missing is intelligibility of the natural order—intelligibility from within. That kind of intelligibility may be compatible with some forms of theism—if God creates a self-contained natural order which he then leaves undisturbed. But it is not compatible with direct theistic explanation of systematic features of the world that would seem otherwise to be brute facts—such as the creation of life from dead matter, or the birth of consciousness, or reason. Such interventionist hypotheses amount to a denial that there is a comprehensive natural order.³⁸

34. *Ibid.*, 25.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 26.

38. *Ibid.*

How do we assess Nagel's claims here? To begin with, let us identify and summarize the main sources of his concern. It is a bit challenging to unravel the cluster of interrelated concerns here, but let us give it a try. We suspect that the whole assortment of Nagel's concerns is predicated on his reasonable assumption that metaphysics and epistemology be adequately tied together. Among his foundational epistemic commitments is what can practically be dubbed an aesthetic preference: he is rather forthright about his psychological aversion to propositions that smack of being ad hoc, to overly pluralistic pictures of the world, to views he considers ontologically indulgent, positing unnecessary and extraneous entities. Even when such entities may accomplish work in explaining some of what is in need of explanation, Nagel is hesitant to affirm them if they do not seem to resonate and dovetail enough with a single natural order. His epistemology precludes theses like Cartesian dualism and interventionist variants of theism, because these would, in his estimation, amount to a denial that there is a comprehensive natural order. They push the quest for intelligibility outside the world, resulting in an inadequately integrated worldview. The epistemic strictures he maintains dictate that the right answer, the true view of reality, be a world involving an organic whole, and supernaturalism simply fails to satisfy such a constraint.

If this sort of summary is the gist of Nagel's concern about theism, how might the classical theist, one who not only believes in the supernatural realm but even in a God who can and does intervene in the natural order, defend such theism against his criticisms? Can supernaturalists answer Nagel's worries and nagging concerns? We think for the most part that they can, and where they cannot, we are inclined to say that this is so much the worse for some of Nagel's epistemic strictures. This at least is the case that we are now going to argue for.

First let us dispense with a few preliminaries. Nagel writes that he lacks the *sensus divinitatis*. Even if such a reality exists, however, the fact that Nagel himself does not personally have much of an experience with it provides no evidence against theism generally or Christianity particularly. All sorts of potential obstacles can stand in the way of such religious experience. Still, the question remains whether there are good arguments worth considering that support theism. Even Plantinga, a firm believer that we can be justified, indeed warranted, in believing in God, as well as full-blooded Christianity while lacking discursive justification, remains convinced that several dozen arguments collectively provide a strong evidential case for the truth of classical theism.

Nagel, recall, also mentions the problem of evil, a big discussion in its own right that we need to hold in abeyance for a few chapters. Writing on the problem of evil in recent years has ballooned into an enormous literature. In the estimation of many, the proponents and advocates of classical theism have had the upper hand in the debate in recent years, as atheologists advancing arguments from evil have consistently had to keep changing their approach to find a workable version of the argument. Even if so, though, evil remains a *serious* problem, worse than most think, believers and unbelievers alike; whether an intractable one, remains to be seen.

The particular crux of the issue on which we wish to focus is Nagel's aesthetic bias in favor of an integrated picture of things, a constraint he is convinced interventionist (i.e., classical) theism cannot satisfy. By calling such a stricture "aesthetic," we do not mean to impugn its value; indeed, we agree that aesthetic considerations play an important role in any holistic and properly expansive epistemic approach, especially as we attempt something as ambitious as identifying the true metaphysical worldview.³⁹ No, rather than denying the need for the satisfaction of such a constraint, we would prefer to argue that classical theism is better at meeting such a constraint, or at least one in its close proximity, than Nagel seems to realize. Nagel's view of theism, in certain respects, seems to be inadequately nuanced and sophisticated.

To help see this, we need look no further than some of the writings of C. S. Lewis. As we do so, it may be surprising to see the prescience with which Lewis anticipated just the sorts of worries that preoccupy Nagel. Recall Nagel's concern that theism (by which we will mean, henceforth, classical and interventionist theism) would preclude the "organic whole" and "comprehensive natural order" Nagel desires. His own Aristotelian-like, emergentist, teleological account of mind, though not compatible with reductionist naturalism, does not preclude the sort of organic wholeness and comprehensively naturalistic explanation he is after. For this reason, despite the latter's obscurity as an explanation, Nagel is more drawn to it than to classical theism with its notions of intelligent creation.

Now, by way of counterpoint, consider this passage from C. S. Lewis, from the eighth chapter of *Miracles*. It comes right after he speaks of the way some people find intolerable the notion of miraculous interventions

39. As theists we are quite open to God being, in an ultimate sense, both the Good and the Beautiful.

in the world. “The reason they find it intolerable,” he writes, “is that they start by taking Nature to be the whole of reality. And they are sure that all reality must be interrelated and consistent.”⁴⁰ He then says he agrees with the latter claim, but he thinks that “they have mistaken a partial system within reality, namely Nature, for the whole.”⁴¹ He then continues:

That being so, the miracle and the previous history of Nature may be interlocked after all but not in the way the Naturalist expected: rather in a much more roundabout fashion. The great complex event called Nature, and the new particular event introduced into it by the miracle, are related by their common origin in God, and doubtless, if we knew enough, most intricately related in His purpose and design, so that a Nature which had had a different history, and therefore been a different Nature, would have been invaded by different miracles or by none at all. In that way the miracles and the previous course of Nature are as well interlocked as any other two realities, but you must go back as far as their common Creator to find the interlocking. You will not find it within Nature.⁴²

So Nagel and Lewis, we might say, entirely agree on the aesthetic constraint for an integrated worldview, but their views are diametrically opposed on the question of what such a constraint demands. Nagel’s insistence is that such integration be found within nature, and Lewis insists that, though it is to be found, it will not be found there. “Everything is connected with everything else: but not all things are connected by the short and straight roads we expected,” Lewis wrote.⁴³ They cannot both be right on this score. Nagel’s constraint would preclude taking seriously Lewis’s suggestion; and Lewis’s alternate suggestion means that Nagel’s effort is bound to fail. In light of so fundamental a conflict of intuitions, argument and evidence would be useful, much more so than subjective epistemic biases. Unfortunately for Nagel, though, this is the precise point where his argument is the thinnest. Lewis, as we are about to see, is just getting started.

40. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, in C. S. Lewis *Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 354.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

Nagel is no pantheist, but he definitely has resonance with panpsychism, according to which, via emergentism, the basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties. This is how he is inclined to explain what needs explaining: that mind must somehow function centrally in the story of reality. Like pantheism, though, such an account is considerably more amorphous and simply vague than the account of classical theism. Nagel seems to consider this an advantage in practice over the crude and dualistic nature of theism, but Lewis would completely disagree. Speaking of pantheism, rather than panpsychism, but in a way that in salient respects could extend equally to both, Lewis writes that:

[A]t every point Christianity has to correct the natural expectations of the Pantheist and offer something more difficult, just as Schrödinger has to correct Democritus. At every moment he has to multiply distinctions and rule out false analogies. He has to substitute the mappings of something that has a positive, concrete, and highly articulated character for the formless generalities in which Pantheism is at home . . . The ascertained nature of any real thing is always at first a nuisance to our natural fantasies—a wretched, pedantic, logic-chopping intruder upon a conversation which was getting on famously without it.⁴⁴

Lewis notes that when people compare adult versions of other worldviews with a knowledge of Christianity acquired in childhood, they get the impression that the Christian account of God is the “obvious” one, the one too easy to be true, while its alternatives seem sublime and profound by comparison. Lewis thinks just the opposite is the case. Reality is hard and obstinate, and not at all what we might expect much of the time. Vague notions of spirituality or a diffused mind animating the universe is hardly a novel notion; it is arguably the native bent of mind and immemorial religion.

An ‘impersonal God’—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king,

44. *Ibid.*, 376.

husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall?⁴⁵

Fascinating to note is that Nagel's problem with theism largely evaporates if it is a theism that does not involve intervention. Had God created the world in such a way that it was henceforth self-sustaining and self-regulating, then, Nagel thinks, there would be hope of reconciling such theism with the sort of worldview he is seeking. But a God who intervenes, who performs miracles, who upholds the universe by his power, who sent his Son into it to die for our sins—this sort of supernaturalism is beyond the pale, an unprincipled epistemic indulgence, an ontological foul.

Interestingly, Lewis himself anticipated this very response. At the beginning of the twelfth chapter, Lewis captures the mentality of those who think a God who intervenes smacks of a petty and capricious tyrant who breaks his own laws. It is the good and wise kind of gods who obey them. Even if miracles do not violate laws of nature, still the impression, in the minds of some, is that they “interrupt the orderly march of events, the steady development of Nature according to her own inherent genius or character. That regular march seems to such critics as I have in mind more impressive than any miracle.”⁴⁶

Lewis himself seems to have entertained such a mentality as an atheist, but he would change his mind eventually. As a literary scholar, he offers an analogy to soften readers up to the propriety of God's interventions. It is the dull schoolboy, he says, who might think that the abnormal hexameters in Virgil or half-rhymes in English poets were due to incompetence. “In reality, of course, every one of them is there for a purpose and breaks the superficial regularity of the metre in obedience to a higher and subtler law: just as the irregularities in *The Winter's Tale* do not impair, but embody and perfect, the inward unity of its spirit.”⁴⁷ Lewis's point is that there are rules behind the rules, a unity which is deeper than uniformity:

A supreme workman will never break by one note or one syllable or one stroke of the brush the living and inward law of the work he is

45. Ibid., 383.

46. Ibid., 385.

47. Ibid., 386.

producing. But he will break without scruple any number of those superficial regularities and orthodoxies which little, unimaginative critics mistake for its laws. The extent to which one can distinguish a just 'license' from a mere botch or failure of unity depends on the extent to which one has grasped the real and inward significance of the work as a whole.⁴⁸

The analogy is even worse for the adamant anti-interventionist than this, though. In his insistence that miracles are improprieties unworthy of the Great Workman rather than expressions of the truest and deepest unity in his total work, he must be reminded that "the gap between God's mind and ours must, on any view, be incalculably greater than the gap between Shakespeare's mind and that of the most peddling critics of the old French school."⁴⁹

Employing yet another literary insight to drive home the point, Lewis highlights Dorothy Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker*, whose thesis is based on the analogy between God's relation to the world and an author's relation to his book. "The ghost story is a legitimate form of art; but you must not bring a ghost into an ordinary novel to get over a difficulty in the plot."⁵⁰ Doing the latter would be a blunder outside the realm of legitimate authorial prerogatives. Just such an analysis fuels many a suspicion that miracles are marvels of the wrong sort, involving an arbitrary interference with the organic whole of a story. Lewis admits that if he thought of miracles in such terms (as Nagel seems to), he would not believe in them either. But Lewis rests assured that if miracles have taken place, "they have occurred because they are the very thing this universal story is about. They are not exceptions (however rarely they occur), nor irrelevancies. They are precisely those chapters in this great story on which the plot turns."⁵¹ For those, like Nagel, who seem to think that atoms and time and space are the main plot of the story of the world, Lewis would respond by suggesting that the narrative God is weaving is a long one

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 387.

50. Ibid., 388.

51. Ibid.

with a complicated plot. Lewis writes, “and we are not, perhaps, very attentive readers.”⁵²

Again, Lewis and Nagel entirely agree on the aesthetic preference that reality be integrated and a unity, even if they disagree on certain matters of uniformity. Lewis defends such subjective and admittedly aesthetic criteria, echoing Sir Arthur Eddington’s phrase that science progresses on convictions, perhaps unjustified but nonetheless cherished, about the innate sense of the fitness of things. A universe in which interventions were ubiquitous and irregularities omnipresent would be anathema; on this Lewis and Nagel agree. Lewis pushes this point a bit further, though, taking aim at naturalism. For we can ask, of what epistemic significance are such preferences? Lewis argues, and Nagel would likely agree, that if the true metaphysics is mindless naturalism, then such epistemic preferences we hold for order and unity are unlikely to be conducive to the truth. They would simply be facts about us. “If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform,” Lewis wrote.⁵³ But if theism is true, and the deepest reality is like us, the ultimate fact is a rational spirit in whose image we have been made, then our epistemic preferences are more plausibly thought to be reliable in pointing us toward the truth. This entirely turns on its head the notion that a desire for unity undermines belief in an interventionist God. Modern science, in fact, came about as a result of men believing in law in nature, expecting it because they believed in a legislator.

But if we admit God, must we admit Miracle? Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it. That is the bargain. Theology says to you in effect, “Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles, and I in return will ratify your faith in uniformity as regards the overwhelming majority of events.” The philosophy which forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be general, to be almost absolute.⁵⁴

Miracles, Lewis argues—at least from the perspective of Christianity—are not arbitrary, capricious interventions, ubiquitous ad hoc interruptions,

52. Ibid., 389.

53. Ibid., 395.

54. Ibid., 395–396.

but carefully orchestrated turning points in the plot, key chapters on which the whole plot of the novel turns, the main theme of the symphony, as it were. Whether specific alleged ones among them are inherently problematic cannot be answered *a priori*, but depends on how illuminating of the whole they prove to be. The incarnation, for example, is a picture of the divine condescending to take human flesh, one person both wholly divine and wholly human. No greater portrait of integration and rapprochement of the natural and supernatural, God and cosmos, is easy to envision. If God can so descend into a human spirit, the reality we inhabit is “more multifariously and subtly harmonious than we had suspected.”⁵⁵

Lewis’s is a classical theistic picture, and his is not the strawman to which simplistic caricatures of religious views lend themselves. If Nagel wishes to defend his aversion to classical theism—despite its superior explanatory power over naturalism—opting instead for his much less evidenced and more obscure conjectures about unintentional teleological emergentism, not only does he have a lot of work to do to defend his own view: he also needs to do considerably more to subject classical theism to critical scrutiny.

55. *Ibid.*, 401.

The Case for Abduction

There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are really necessary for the existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.

SHERLOCK HOLMES¹ (*The Naval Treaty*)

FROM ONE ANGLE, understanding the nature of morality—its maddening persistence, haunting presence, beautiful appeal, mysterious authority, and prescriptive power—constitutes a compelling intellectual puzzle, a philosophical conundrum that, for those inclined, is endlessly fascinating, taxing our intellectual powers and testing our worldviews to the breaking point. But it is more than that, because it also engages the heart and invites us on a journey to consider existentially central questions about life's ultimate meaning and purpose, questions nobody can responsibly ignore forever. It is a puzzle that captivates the mind, moves the heart, but ultimately strikes at the very meaning of it all.

We thus thought it fitting to begin this chapter with a few lines from the great detective quietly reposing on Baker Street while encircled with

1. From *The Naval Treaty*. For parallels between the work of epistemologists and detectives, see David Baggett, "Sherlock Holmes as Epistemologist," in *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*, eds. Philip Tallon and David Baggett (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), pp. 7–21.

wafts of tobacco smoke, because the mystery of morality is what this book is about, and we are ready to turn to argument. Sherlock's reference to deduction is also significant, because, although we will discuss a deductive version of a moral argument that attempts to explain morality by appeal to God and that denies the adequacy of naturalism, we will make our case that an abductive argument is preferable. Abduction, in this context, is an inference to the best explanation, the case for which we hope to build, rather than a case for Holmes to solve.

Last chapter, we touched on the work of William James. What occupied his attention regarding morality was the performative issue more than its ontological cousin. In a merely human world without God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal motivating power, James argued. He also wrote that the "stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands."² James believed, however, that owing to our cognitive limitations, in a practical sense this postulation of God serves only to let loose in us the "strenuous mood": "Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free in those who have religious faith."³ Despite James's aversion to dogmatism and his affinity for pluralism, this was, at the end of the day, his own stab at a moral argument for God, or at any rate for rational religious belief, and an important part of his attempt to solve the mystery of morality, in particular the "casuistic question" it raises concerning the various goods and ills that men recognize. Now we will venture our own effort at solving the mystery. Paradoxically, as will become clear in this chapter, our examination of moral arguments for God's existence will end up providing us with reasons to take a serious, sustained look at the range of naturalistic ethical theories on offer.

A Perfect God

Yoram Hazony, author of *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scriptures*, recently wrote an interesting and provocative opinion article for the *New York Times* in which he summarized in no uncertain terms his skepticism about the

2. William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 161.

3. *Ibid.*

idea of a God who is perfect.⁴ His position is quite reminiscent of James's skepticism about the God of perfect being theology, Calvinism, and scholasticism and more recently of Harold Kushner's *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* from a few decades ago.

We wish to demur from James and Hazony and to defend perfect being theology. While we reject Calvinistic soteriology, we affirm God as the ground of being; and while we retain the prerogative to refrain from affirming divine simplicity, we think it important to capture the insight inspiring it and to affirm God's perfection and supreme ontological status. Although James was at times quite insightful, at other times his depiction of God sounded more like that of a finite, fallible demigod, which we think was a major mistake. We will address this issue by taking up a few of Hazony's more recent suggestions.

Hazony suggests that there are two compelling reasons the God of classical theism should be rejected: first, again like James, the problem of evil, and its challenge to fit the divine perfections (omniscience, omnipotence, etc.) together coherently, and second, the failure of such a picture to match up to the Old Testament portrayal of God.

With respect to God's alleged perfections, Hazony insists that the problem of evil shows that God is either not possibly or plausibly both all-good and all-powerful, for if he were we would not find all the injustices in the world that we do. And in his view, there are other contradictions in addition to this most glaring one. He and James chalk up affirmation of such perfections more to the influence of Greek philosophy than to biblical thought. Regarding the God of the Old Testament, Hazony writes that "it's hard to find any evidence that the prophets and scholars who wrote the Hebrew Bible (or 'Old Testament') thought of God in this way at all. The God of Hebrew Scripture is not depicted as immutable, but repeatedly changes his mind about things (for example, he regrets having made man). He is not all-knowing, since he's repeatedly surprised by things (like the Israelites abandoning him for a statue of a cow). He is not perfectly powerful either, in that he famously cannot control Israel and get its people to do what he wants. And so on."⁵

4. Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scriptures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also his "An Imperfect God," November 25, 2012, Opinionator, *New York Times*. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/an-imperfect-god/?_php=true&type=blogs&_r=0 (accessed June 22, 2014).

5. Hazony, "An Imperfect God."

Consider the standard perfections of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence—the main concern of perfect being theology. Hazony says forthrightly that the problem of evil renders reconciliation of omnipotence and omnibenevolence either highly unlikely or flat-out impossible. The “impossibility” claim is the logical problem of evil, which it is generally agreed has been effectively answered by Alvin Plantinga’s free will defense.⁶ The “unlikelihood” claim reflects Hazony’s view that the evidential argument from evil is decisive. This is a huge claim, one rather at odds with the state of the present discussion of the problem of evil among philosophers. In his estimation, at any rate, the God of the Old Testament does not encounter such a problem because such a God is not the God of classical theism; the problem of evil thus does not arise in the same insuperable way. The Hebrew God, he insists, is not the God of the “omni”-qualities, that is, of perfection.

Hazony goes on to suggest that to speak of perfections in God is problematic anyway because talk of perfection makes sense only in terms of achieving the right balance of properties, not by maximizing a thing’s constituent principles simultaneously. He uses the example of a bottle whose body and neck are in the right balance to achieve optimal function. In fact, though, contrary to what Hazony is saying here, the procedure of attributing to God the set of great-making properties works exactly because such attributes lend themselves to intrinsic maxima and a natural stopping point where God is concerned. In contrast, to speak of a perfect bottle is colloquial at best, confused at worst—how many drops of liquid are contained in the “perfect bottle” admits of no objective answer. God has as much power, knowledge, and goodness as are mutually compatible and compossible. Hazony once more points to failed philosophical efforts to make sense of this, when in fact the work of many contemporary Anselmian philosophical theologians has articulated much of this quite effectively. It requires more sophistication than Hazony is showing, though; for example, if God sovereignly chooses to confer on human beings libertarian freedom, that means that some logically possible worlds

6. Marilyn Adams demurs, insisting that Plantinga’s answer leaves untouched the sorts of evils found in the actual intensity and distribution as we find in the world. Unless we can speak more specifically to the most horrific and meaning-depriving of sufferings, she thinks, the logical problem of evil, as she casts it anyway, remains unsolved. Her effort to do so, to explain how philosophy can provide consolation even in the worst kinds of actual sufferings, and to do so by tapping into distinctive aspects of Christian theology, can be found in her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

are not feasible ones, true enough, but it hardly shows that God is not omnipotent. Hazony's claim to the contrary seems predicated on an unrefined conception of omnipotence.

Hazony wishes to emphasize the need for tentativeness and provisional claims in theology because our knowledge of God remains fragmentary and partial. In this connection, he even pushes an ambitious and dubious interpretation of the great "I am" declaration of God from the book of Exodus. In particular, since it is in the imperfect tense, he takes this text as an indication of God's incompleteness and changeability, rather than the more straightforward claim that God is uncreated and ontologically independent. In Hazony's view, "The belief that any human mind can grasp enough of God to begin recognizing perfections in him would have struck the biblical authors as a pagan conceit."⁷

According to the Hebrew Bible, Hazony insists, God represents the embodiment of life's experiences and vicissitudes, from hardship to joy; and although God is ultimately faithful and just, these aren't perfections or qualities that obtain necessarily. "On the contrary, it is the *hope* that God is faithful and just that is the subject of ancient Israel's faith: We hope that despite the frequently harsh reality of our daily experience, there is nonetheless a faithfulness and justice that rules in our world in the end."⁸ Recall that Abegg had characterized James's view in a similar way. Hazony concludes his piece like this:

The ancient Israelites, in other words, discovered a more *realistic* God than that descended from the tradition of Greek thought. But philosophers have tended to steer clear of such a view, no doubt out of fear that an imperfect God would not attract mankind's allegiance. Instead, they have preferred to speak to us of a God consisting of a series of sweeping idealizations—idealizations whose relation to the world in which we actually live is scarcely imaginable. Today, with theism rapidly losing ground across Europe and among Americans as well, we could stand to reconsider this point. Surely a more plausible conception of God couldn't hurt.⁹

7. Hazony, "An Imperfect God."

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

Is it really theism that is “losing ground,” in the specified parts of the world, or rather a certain cluster of religious institutions? And is it not apparent that a richly traditional view of God is dominant in those parts of the world where religious faith is thriving? The recent phenomenon of “the New Atheists” as the current spokesmen for unbelief is of interest, but acceding to their claims is hardly the way to articulate “a more plausible conception of God.” Indeed, it will be clear to any serious student of theism that their conception of God is vastly less sophisticated and philosophically resilient than the concept of a perfect being that was so well captured by a man steeped in biblical thought, the medieval Christian theist, Saint Anselm.

Tom Morris asks, “What indeed does it even mean to speak of the Hebraic depiction of God as *more realistic* than the idea of God as altogether perfect? It is certainly more anthropomorphic, or to put it more precisely, anthropopathic—portraying God as if having human passions. But that is the natural outflow of the literary forms in the original biblical documents. The fact that they don’t explicitly present us with the precisely articulated conception of God that philosophers have seen suggested by the cumulative impact of its most exalted passages does not at all compromise the philosophical work of clarifying such a conception, nor does it render the effort artificial, or invalid.”¹⁰

Hazony thinks it best to abandon the classical conception of God as perfect, thinking it a philosophical indulgence at odds with Hebrew scripture. He explicitly rejects the idea that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but he is a bit more hesitant to reject God’s omnibenevolence. He affirms that God is faithful and just, but denies that these are perfections. What does this denial mean, though? That God is *somewhat* faithful and *rather* just, faithful to some but not others, intermittently just, but occasionally unjust? If God is less than perfectly loving, does he on occasion hate, or at least fail to love? Does God have an irremediable mean streak or a vulnerability to sin? If Hazony wishes to be sanguine in giving up the perfections, perhaps he should think realistically about what less-than-perfect-goodness could involve when it comes to God. He retains, by his own admission, the hope that “in the end” God will show himself to be faithful and just. The question that begs to be answered is exactly how faithful and just God may be hoped to show himself to be. *Perfectly* faithful and just or only moderately

10. Personal correspondence, January 20, 2013.

so? The only hope worth holding onto is that God is perfectly faithful and just. This is the conception of God sufficient to answer the problem of evil and that can fill us with the only hope that won't ultimately disappoint.

The claim that a perfect God is a Greek convention incorporated into theology is an allegation that altogether overlooks the important role of what theologians refer to as general revelation. The Greeks had no corner on the market of reason. Why is it merely a Greek notion that God possesses all the perfections? Plenty of Greeks—*Euthyphro*, for example—believed in all sorts of rather morally deficient gods; we could return the favor and suggest that Hazony's conception of God is more influenced by Greek ideas in this regard than by scripture. The fact remains, though, that the writers of the New Testament were deeply steeped in Old Testament teachings and theology and saw Jesus as the fulfillment of all of that, and in the New Testament itself we find ample indications of a morally perfect and altogether loving God. This happy convergence of the a priori deliverances of reason and the a posteriori deliverances of scripture should come as no surprise since one would expect resonance between the outcomes of special and general revelation. Nothing less than this view of God can answer our deepest hopes. Or so we will argue, and this chapter will try to make clear why doing so abductively is our principled preference.

Anti-Platonist Moral Argument

Consider the following deductive piece of natural theology and moral apologetics, dubbed for present purposes the “anti-Platonist moral argument” (“APMA” for short):

APMA

1. If God does not exist, then there are no objective moral truths.
2. At least some moral truths are objective.
3. So, God exists.

The locution of “objective moral truths” is notorious for being multiply ambiguous—from intersubjective agreement, conformity to certain facts, stable, invariant, unchanging, and the list goes on interminably. So to ensure disambiguation, let's assume in this context the following definition, which is a slight modification of a proposal by William Lane Craig:

4. Objective moral truths = **def.** facts according to which some actions and motivations are right or wrong independently of whether anybody believes it to be so.

Craig adds that this is to suggest, for example, that Nazi anti-Semitism was morally wrong, even though the Nazis who carried out the Holocaust thought that it was morally permissible; and it would still be wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brain-washing everybody who disagreed with them.¹¹

The “anybody” to which the definition refers does not, presumably, include God, because that would by fiat preclude the possibility of any version of robust theistic ethics according to which morality depends asymmetrically on the character, commands, or nature of God. Unless God is excluded from among the persons on whom morality does not depend, Craig’s own theistically based ethical views would not comprise convictions in moral objectivity. This is, of course, an altogether familiar issue to theistic ethicists who insist that moral truths depend on a mind, but not human minds. It is the synthesis to which Alvin Plantinga points at the end of his APA presidential address “How to Be an Anti-Realist,” the rapprochement at which Tom Morris hints between mind-independence and mind-dependence in his chapter on “Absolute Creation” in *Anselmian Explorations*, and the Augustinian vision embraced by Robert Adams in his rightly famous piece on divine necessity.¹² This synthetic rapprochement at the heart of a theistic vision of reality, including moral and modal reality, is likely why some theistic ethicists prefer language of “moral realism” over “moral objectivity.” But defined clearly, the language of moral objectivity should not pose any intractable problems, at least at this stage of the analysis. In his debate with Sam Harris, Craig put it like this: objective moral facts are valid and binding independent of human opinion. It is clear what he is trying to do, it carries quite a bit of intuitive force, and

11. Craig offers versions of the moral argument in various places, including in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, eds. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

12. Alvin Plantinga, “How to Be an Anti-Realist,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56, no. 1 (New York: State University of New York Press, 1982); Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987); and Robert Adams, “Divine Necessity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 741–752.

he does it consistently. At the root of the concern about the line between objectivity and subjectivity, though, are seeds that can sprout into a measure of principled resistance to a variant of APMA, as we will see.

It should also be noted that this definition of objective moral truths delimits the field of discourse to deontic matters of rightness and wrongness. For present purposes this will suffice, but in subsequent sections of this chapter the discussion will broaden the account of moral objectivity to include axiological matters of value as well.

C. Stephen Layman, a theist, rejects APMA because of his reservations about the first premise, the “atheological premise.”¹³ Layman himself believes in divine necessity, but he recognizes that if he were to presuppose it in the context of arguing for God’s existence then his efforts could be cast as objectionably circular. Perhaps he is trying only to endorse an argument for God’s existence that appeals to premises likely to be accepted by those not already believers in God’s existence, much less God’s necessary existence.¹⁴

Layman is not assuming God’s existence to be contingent; rather, he is avoiding any appearance of presupposing it to be necessary. Rather than rejecting the atheological premise because he thinks it *false*, he instead thinks that it lacks noncircular justification, wide enough support, adequate intuitive force, and sufficient obviousness.

John Milliken similarly considers whether there can be morality without God, that is, whether or not the atheological premise is true. He envisions a world without God that includes beings like ourselves who would still place demands on one another even if there were no God. In so doing,

13. C. Stephen Layman, “A Moral Argument for the Existence of God,” in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?*, pp. 51f.

14. Layman confirmed this suspicion in personal correspondence on December 12, 2011. After admitting that the atheological premise is trivially true on standard semantics for counterpossibles (and he does consider it a counterpossible), he added, “In the context of a discussion of God’s existence we can’t simply assume that God exists of necessity. So, my reasons for accepting (i) would beg the question in that context.” We resonate with his concern here. Although we are inclined to think (as we will argue in this book) that the best explanation of necessary moral facts is God—and thus that classical theism rather than Platonism is warranted and principled and not merely a function of Anselmian bias—we also suspect that the epistemic confidence we can have in certain necessary moral truths should make the atheological premise suspect. If, after all, someone were to appeal to nonstandard semantics and presume such a premise to involve a counterpossible, but then—to determine its truth value—they imagine a world just like this one except without God and ask whether moral truths obtained therein, he would be well within his epistemic rights to retain considerable tenacity to believe that they did.

he echoes a thought experiment William James once entertained that led to his conclusion that “without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but there is some obligation wherever there is a claim.”¹⁵

Milliken himself believes in divine necessity. Nevertheless, he thinks that there is value in the thought experiment because if, counterpossibly, such a world obtained, it would be a world, so he argues, in which moral facts obtain. His intuition, even if mistaken, does not seem obviously irrational, and it is an intuition that makes him skeptical about the atheological premise. Milliken seems to think the atheological premise to be a nontrivially false counterpossible. Layman thinks it can’t (noncircularly) be assumed to be true. Both, as a result, harbor doubts about APMA.

Now let’s extend our discussion to Craig’s version of the moral argument.

A Deductive Argument

In *Good God* we offered a critique of the deductive version of the moral argument employed by Craig, while advancing an abductive version of our own.¹⁶ What, if anything, is the problem with Craig’s deductive version whose conclusion follows with airtight certainty from the premises? To understand the reservations, let us take a look at the argument itself, which we will call “The Deductive Argument” or (“TDA” for short):

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. So, God exists.

Craig fleshes out moral facts to encompass issues of both moral axiology (moral goodness) and deontological matters (obligatoriness), recognizing that an adequate moral theory should be able to explain both sets of facts, their organic connections as well as their conceptual distinctions.

15. James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays on Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 194.

16. David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

In a review of *Good God*, John Hare asserts that the book argues “convincingly that William Lane Craig’s view that atheism leads to moral nihilism is unlikely to be persuasive.”¹⁷ This was the nature of the critique—not that Craig’s argument is a bad or unsound argument, but rather that it is relatively unpersuasive to many committed atheists. Actually it made a few different closely related claims, some more ambitious than others. In retrospect perhaps the best way of putting our point is to say we have at least a partial explanation of why the argument is not more persuasive than it is. For we argued that there is much to appreciate about the argument and that we resonate with it in certain respects. Nietzsche, we opined, should be taken more seriously than he is by atheists who claim that God can be painlessly excluded from the moral picture. If God does not exist, that has simply huge implications; likewise if God *does* exist! But our point was about the relative persuasiveness of arguments to the effect that atheism leads to nihilism. Although there is an inexorable logical rigor and tightness to such arguments, they will largely prove unpersuasive to most atheists, at least for a while, and for understandable reasons (as Nietzsche prophesied). Or so we argued, despite the fact that, if an Anselmian God exists, the argument is both valid and sound. So why isn’t it more persuasive?

If classical theists are right, then a world like this one—or any world at all, in fact—could not exist without God. God is the ground of being without whom nothing else can exist. As Craig himself would readily agree, God is not just one more garden-variety item in the inventory of reality—the way James too often seemed to suggest in his visceral aversion to absolutism. Looking at this world through the eyes of an atheist leads to the contrary assumption that such a world *is* possible without God. Such an assumption, if true, would entail the (necessary) falsehood of Anselmianism. Indeed, in such a contingency, classical theists could not be more wrong! Moreover, if Anselmians are wrong about the dependence of everything on God, why should they think that they are right about morality in an atheistic world? If atheism is true, and God does not exist, classical theists are dead wrong; and in such a case, the confidence with which they should assert the inevitable nihilism of atheism ought to decrease. (By the way, and by parity of reasoning, if God *does* exist and this were to become known, atheists should admit that *they* are wrong in that

¹⁷ <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24730/?id=24009>.

case, and acknowledge some of the deep implications of theism rather than pontificating about the irrelevance of God *even if he exists.*) At any rate, the atheist is convinced that God does not exist and that a world at the level of complexity as it appears is possible without God—a world that at least looks like it can feature love, relationships, the satisfactions of morality, the need for social harmony, and the like—and a world like that, if it is possible without God, rightly invests in atheists a certain entitlement to some tenacity on the issue of morality. (We should also note that plenty think the argument quite persuasive.)

Classical Christians can explain this phenomenon very well, namely: a world like this just *can't exist* without God, because God functions at the foundation of all that exists. Metaphysics informs metaethics, contra Milliken. So it is rather natural for people in this world, even if they are atheists, to apprehend the power of morality, to sense its authority, and, thinking this is reconcilable with an atheistic world, to look beyond God for the foundations of morality. In a debate with Kai Nielsen years ago, J. P. Moreland rightly warned against this very form of reasoning by atheists. It remains natural for atheists to reason in this way until they become convinced God exists after all, but it is tantamount, if God exists necessarily, to domesticating a particularly intractable counterpossible. The treatment, by theists, of God as easily eliminable from the picture only lends itself to such atheist reasoning against which Moreland warned, which can be just as question begging on the atheistic side as would the circular reasoning from the theistic side Layman is so vigilant to avoid. In fact, the mistake to which Moreland points is another instance of the deflationary analysis.

At any rate, what the dubious thought experiment leads to is in one important sense unobjectionable: an effort to make sense of morality on the assumption that this is an atheistic world. We agree with Craig that such efforts fail, even if not in every sense, but nevertheless we think that this is what can largely explain why arguments that atheism leads to nihilism are often bound to be less persuasive than many theists might expect. It would be better, we suggest, to approach atheists by affirming their common convictions about moral truth and then asking what better explains such facts in all of their richness, rather than implicitly encouraging them to assume such a world like the actual world is consistent with atheism and then inviting them to construct a secular ethic. We remain concerned that doing so implicitly bolsters the convictions of secular ethicists that there is nothing suspect about their methodology, which is indeed potentially

question begging. By taking seriously the picture of God that we thought was most rational, in our previous book we aimed to avoid treating the most radical of counterpossibles like a garden-variety counterfactual in which God is so easily excisable from the metaphysical equation. We were, in a real sense, assiduously avoiding yet another instance of the deflationary fallacy by resisting the easy notion that a world like this could exist independent from God.

Craig is Anselmian and he himself is inclined to accentuate the counterpossible nature of thought experiments involving assumptions contrary to implications of such theology. One particularly illustrative example of this took place when a few secular moral theorists, while locking horns with Craig, entertained what they admit, for purposes of argument, may be the counterpossible nature of God's issuing a patently evil command like child torture or rape. Sinnott-Armstrong (similar to Louise Antony) criticizes Craig's divine command theory by writing, "If God commanded us to rape, that command would not create a moral requirement to rape. Of course, Craig says that God never would or could command us to rape. However, even if God in fact never would or could command us to rape, the divine command theory still implies the counterfactual that, if God did command us to rape, then we would have a moral obligation to rape. That is absurd."¹⁸

Craig's rejoinder is worth repeating:

Even if we . . . reject the usual semantics and allow that some counterfactuals with impossible antecedents may be nonvacuously true or false, how are we to assess the truth of a statement like this? It is like wondering whether, if there were a round square, its area would equal the square of one of its sides. And what would it matter how one answered, since what is imagined is logically incoherent? I do not see that the divine command theorist is committed to the nonvacuous truth of the counterfactual in question nor that anything of significance hangs on his thinking it to be nonvacuously true rather than false.¹⁹

18. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 106.

19. Craig, "This Most Gruesome of Guests," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?* p. 172.

Anselmianism offers excellent reason to think that Craig is right to resist Sinnott-Armstrong's extended arbitrariness objection to DCT, along with reason to think the first premise of Craig's deductive moral argument is nontrivially true. For if an Anselmian God did not exist, *per impossibile*, nothing would exist at all, including moral facts. So we have reason to suspect that a world like the actual world could not possibly obtain without God. And in fact, this is at the heart of our concerns about the atheological premise: entertaining such a possibility—a world like this but without God, as Craig implicitly encourages his atheist interlocutors to do—offers secularists quite a lot of theoretical resources to use as they set out to construct a moral theory. Little wonder, then, that they may, initially anyway and perhaps for sometime, be slow to accept the atheological premise of Craig's argument.

For such reasons, we prefer an abductive moral argument that does not rely on the atheological premise of Craig's deductive argument. It argues that theism *better* explains the facts of morality rather than saying that naturalism can say nothing of morality. It would be surprising if atheists could not come up with anything by way of a substantive moral theory using the rich resources of a world like this, which is only here, if theists are right, because God created it.

Craig notes that we rightly discern the counterfactual nature of his atheological premise. The premise is actually, we suspect, a counterpossible, a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent. Counterpossibles can have nontrivial truth values, but we have reservations about the argument, not because the premise is false, but because it concedes too much to the nontheist, namely, that we should talk about a world of personal agents acting in ways that we do even if there were no God. Milliken has a point that this would seriously cast doubt on the atheological premise. The complaint here is that TDA is unpersuasive to principled and thoughtful atheists. So the critique has to do with the psychological force of the argument, its effectiveness in persuading nonbelievers.

Our claim surprises Craig because, in his experience of speaking to university students, the moral argument as he presents it is probably the most persuasive of his arguments, often eliciting a positive response among students. He defends his formulation of the moral argument as exceptionally clear and simple, while having premises that are widely held to be plausibly true, even by atheists. He asks: What evidence is there that his formulation is not persuasive to principled and thoughtful atheists or that our formulation is more persuasive? And he insists

that we provided no such evidence in *Good God*. Craig suggests that we need to do some sort of sociological survey to justify our assertion. Anecdotally, he notes, it is easy to find plenty of atheists who find the atheological premise persuasive: Nietzsche, Russell, Sartre, Mackie, Ruse, Pinker, even Richard Dawkins. He asks us to consider the recent article “Confessions of an Ex-Moralist,” by atheist philosopher Joel Marks concerning his epiphany which led him to reject objective moral values and duties:

... could I believe that, say, the *wrongness* of a lie was any more intrinsic to an ... utterance than *beauty* was to a sunset or *wonderfulness* to the universe? Does it not make far more sense to suppose that all of these phenomena arise in *my* breast, that they are the responses of a particular sensibility to otherwise valueless events and entities? ... someone else might respond completely differently from me, such that for him ..., the lie was permissible, the sunset banal, the universe nothing but atoms and the void. ... if there was one thing I knew in this entire universe, it was that some things are morally wrong. It is wrong to toss ... chicks, alive and conscious, into a meat grinder, as happens in the egg industry. It is wrong to scorn homosexuals and deny them civil rights. It is wrong to massacre people in death camps. ... I knew in my soul, with all of my conviction, ... that they were wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew this with more certainty than I knew that the earth is round. But suddenly I knew it no more. I was not merely skeptical or agnostic about it; I had come to believe, and do still, that these things are not wrong. I used to think that animal agriculture was wrong. Now I will call a spade a spade and declare simply that I very much *dislike* it and want it to stop. ... I am simply no longer in the business of trying to derive an *ought* from an *is*. I must accept that other people sometimes have opposed preferences, even when we are agreed on all the relevant facts and are reasoning correctly. My outlook has therefore become more practical: I desire to influence the world in such a way that *my* desires have a greater likelihood of being realized.²⁰

20. Joel Marks, “Confessions of an Ex-Moralist,” *The Stone* (August 21, 2011).

Such examples are plentiful, Craig argues; many principled and thoughtful atheists see the truth of the atheological premise even given all the resources of the world without God. Of course, Craig is rightly pointing here to the aforementioned coterie of atheists in the nihilist tradition.

Craig admits that we are quite right that most atheists will resist nihilism. John Cottingham, for example, reports that “the increasing consensus among philosophers today is that some kind of objectivism of . . . value is correct. . . .”²¹ But Craig doubts that this consensus is due to the fact that a world without God has the explanatory resources to ground objective moral values and duties. Rather it is because of the evident truth of morality and a refusal to back off of atheism no matter what. Atheist philosopher Peter Cave defends moral objectivism by stating that “whatever skeptical arguments may be brought against our belief that killing the innocent is morally wrong, we are more certain that the killing is morally wrong than that the argument is sound. . . . Torturing an innocent child for the sheer fun of it is morally wrong.”²² While such reasoning does provide warrant for moral confidence, Craig argues, it does nothing to warrant rejection of the atheological premise.

Moreover, he adds, if nontheists are convinced that objective moral values and duties would still exist in a world without God, why would they be persuaded that objective moral values and duties are better explained by theism than atheism? After all, they think that we *do* live in a world without God with all the resources for secular morality that, as Craig puts it, we think entitle them to resist theistically grounded morality. So why would they be persuaded by the abductive claim but not by the deductive argument? Can we, Craig asks, give some examples of atheists who rejected the atheological premise but have come to believe in theistic ethics because they were persuaded that objective moral values and duties are better explained by God?

Craig suspects that we ourselves will end up arguing, in effect, for the atheological premise. How would an argument for God as the best explanation of moral values and duties be formulated? Craig quotes us as

21. John Cottingham, “Philosophers Are Finding Fresh Meanings in Truth, Goodness and Beauty,” *The Times* (June 17, 2006).

22. Peter Cave, *Humanism* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009), p. 146.

suggesting something like this: “There are objective moral facts, . . . and such objective facts are better explained by a religious understanding of reality than by a Russellian [atheistic] world. So morality gives us some significant preliminary reason to believe in God.”²³

While Craig has no problems with the moral argument formulated as an inference to the best explanation, he suspects that, when one gets down to showing that the best explanation of objective moral values and duties is God, one will almost inevitably slip into arguing that, given atheism, objective moral values and duties would plausibly not exist. For example, he claims that later in our book we lapse into precisely this sort of argumentation when we write:

Nietzsche is an example of someone who grasped far reaching implications that follow from rejecting God’s existence. There’s something refreshingly bold and honest about the way he saw among such implications a radical revision of traditional values and the loss of the necessary foundations for morality classically construed . . . Whereas Nietzsche understood the transcendent foundations of classical morality and the implications of atheism, contemporary atheists who think God can be painlessly eliminated from our ontology and yet remain sentimental about moral discourse fail to take Nietzsche seriously enough. Ontologically speaking, God’s nonexistence has huge implications, and the cavalier and sanguine dismissal of God as morally irrelevant bespeaks a particularly poignant sort of blind spot.²⁴

But, Craig suggests, these Nietzschean implications are exactly what the atheological premise asserts, adding that his formulation of the argument has the dialectical advantage of meeting the atheist in the world as he conceives it to be and asking whether morality would be objective if God did not exist. So he concludes that there is nothing wrong with allowing the atheist the impossible supposition that we live in an atheistic world and then asking whether objective moral values and duties would exist.

23. Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, p. 11.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–203.

A Rejoinder

Craig accurately casts the nature of our reservations about the deductive version of the moral argument, and raises a number of excellent questions for our consideration. His comments spurred a bit of additional analysis to augment our original treatment. TDA is a beautiful argument in a lot of ways, and it is altogether understandable that Craig would choose to use it in a number of contexts. So why be critical of it at all?

An Anselmian theist is inclined to think, as does Craig, that a world like this one, at this level of complexity, would not be possible without God's having created it. After all, this is a world with creatures like us, creatures who, if we as theists are right, are actually made in the image of God, creatures with the sort of intersubjective moral agreements we have, creatures who derive the satisfactions of morality we do, creatures with the conative, cognitive, and affective capacities of ours, able rationally to apprehend some rather insightful deliverances of enlightened egoism, creatures with the ability for clear moral apprehensions and with the essential properties we have.

If, however, we grant to the atheists the resources of this world to generate their moral theories, a world invested with the intimations of the eternal and riddled with significance the way this one actually is, having been made by God, it would be rather surprising if the atheist ethicist could do nothing to build an ethical theory or reason from an ethical perspective. Among the fodder he is able to use, after all, would be the following: human nature, social harmony, interpersonal interactions, the deliverances of various hypothetical imperatives whose goals are practically universal, a wide variety and assortment of physical, psychological, metaphysical, aesthetic, practical, and epistemic features of such a world. As theists we believe that, since this world is the way it is, we have reason to expect secular thinkers to be able to travel at least some distance down the road of doing ethics and building ethical theory. Still, we think that such theories, even at their best, will not adequately explain the nature of morality, and certainly can't explain it as well as can robust classical theism; but that conclusion comes only after a lot of work is done wading through those theories and subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Hasty rejections of such theories don't seem appropriate, at least in a sustained philosophical discussion; there is no substitute for careful, patient examination of each of these theories and systematic argument to show that together and individually they do not fully succeed, even if they do contain

some insights along the way, which they often do, because a nontheistic theory is not always an antitheistic theory, and it may well exhibit features that perfectly dovetail with a theistic worldview. So it is not that secular theories fail altogether to explain anything morally, even if they don't get us all the way down the road; they don't explain as many moral facts as theism can, nor do they explain moral facts as well as theism, but they are not without their resources and insights. To say, then, that we can have this very world, minus God, and yet have "no (objective) morality" at all, seems to us potentially misleading—strategically useful at times, but all things considered not the best approach for most contexts. Recognizing such a point is entirely consistent with our argument that an explanation that includes this world *conjoined with God* makes a *fuller* case and provides the *better* explanation of the full range of moral facts in need of explanation. *God and Cosmos*.

In terms of the relative psychological persuasive power of the TDA, we made a couple of different claims, one of which better captures what we were trying to say. In retrospect we may have overstated it when we intimated that this variant of the argument is unpersuasive; we said it better when we suggested that we had at least a partial grasp on why the argument may not be as persuasive as some might think it should be. Ours is a relatively modest suggestion: that the argument, sound as it may well be, may not be as effective as some might suggest because, by treating the first premise as a nontrivially true counterpossible, the argument accords atheists implicit permission to use the full range of empirical realities in the actual world to build their moral arguments, and among the empirical realities of this world are the capacity for clear apprehensions of moral truths, a robust semantics for ethics, and the resources of the actual world for ontological fodder. For naturalists committed to their secular perspective, granting them such permission understandably encourages them to think that their worldview is consistent with the deliverances of those apprehensions. So when they hear the claim that if God does not exist, then morality lacks any foundation whatsoever, it tends most often to strain their credulity. The reasons for this are fairly understandable. Until they have more thoughtfully considered the range of potential moral theories at their disposal, along with the stark implications of naturalism and the range of moral phenomena in need of explanation, they perhaps remain entitled to considerable tenacity in the matter as they attempt to make full rational sense of morality in its distinctive features, or at least minimal features able to be salvaged with the resources of their materialism.

Craig claims that many principled and thoughtful atheists see the truth of the atheological premise, that the nonexistence of God carries profound moral implications and with it the loss of one's rational commitment to ethics classically construed. We don't disagree, although at present the number of secular philosophical practitioners who remain some form of moral realist is still substantially higher than those who have given morality up. This is of course consistent with there still being many who have given morality up or moved into nihilism on the basis of their atheism. *Many* is consistent with what's still a relatively small percentage of the whole. But we are not surprised by the fact that a number of thoughtful and principled atheists have come to the conclusion that atheism lacks adequate resources to undergird morality because, for one thing, we ourselves argue that atheism yields this result philosophically. Thoughtful naturalists are entitled to be slow to come to this conclusion, however, even if they indeed should eventually arrive at the conclusion. We think we have some degree of understanding as to the reason for the slowness of the process, namely, that such thinkers have the full array of resources of the actual world at their disposal to construct their moral theory. Of course Craig is right to suggest that some of the reluctance owes to an *a priori* resistance to anything that goes contrary to their rigid commitment to naturalism; no doubt that's true and we're not inclined to deny it, nor to defend such partisans and sophists. But we are giving many naturalists the benefit of the doubt and suggesting that their hesitation in arriving at the conclusion that their worldview can't make enough sense of morality is at least a partial function of the richness of the resources at their ready disposal; resources that come from a world that, if we're right as theists, has the texture, depth, and thickness it does, and is able to exist in the first place, only because it was created and is sustained and imbued with meaning and significance by God, unbeknownst to such atheists of course.

Now, laudably TDA, positing a nontrivially true counterpossible, meets the atheist where he is, since the atheist is convinced that this is an atheistic world. Unless we are careful here, however, what the proponent of the argument does is take away with one hand what he offers in the other. He meets the atheist where the atheist is, yet then dismisses too hastily the atheists' serious efforts to construct a secular ethic. This particular argument's effectiveness at persuading undergraduates heretofore swayed by ethical relativism is not the same as the effectiveness of arguments likely to convince those familiar with the works of John Searle or Derek Parfit. Conferring on the atheist our blessing to construct his moral theory with

the resources of this world, when those resources are as rich as they are, this world having been created by God and populated with folks like us created in God's image, explains why so many secular theories of ethics have arisen. Moreover, it explains why plenty of them have considerable merit, focusing as they do on powerfully distinctive aspects of the human condition rooted in our essential natures, our empathetic sympathies, and our reasons for actions. Denying a fair enough hearing is no longer meeting atheists where they are, but showing that we are too desirous to arrive at the intended destination. Insisting that such theories have nothing to offer is a more ambitious claim than we need make in this context, and it's likely unwarranted anyway. And again, it's unnecessary, because by modifying the argument into an abductive one, when the context allows it, one need not bite off more than he can chew. By claiming slightly less, the moral apologist can sometimes accomplish more. So we would respectfully counsel replacing the deductive version with an inference to the best explanation, and rather than insisting that this world is incapable of underwriting any moral theory, we can claim, more modestly, that *this world along with God* provides the *better* account of the full range of moral facts in need of explanation than can naturalism alone.

Interestingly, in the writings of such preeminent theistic ethicists as Linda Zagzebski and Robert Adams, to take just a smattering of notable examples, we find a hint of just this recognition. Adams, for example, thinks that when we set out to find what best fills the role of moral obligations, what sort of phenomenon makes sense of the distinctive ways we use deontic language and employ the notion of moral duty, social requirement theory has the best hope.²⁵ It helps explain the idea that obligations are owed to persons, that guilt is appropriate for having failed to discharge our obligations, and so on. Human social requirement theory is not without resources to begin making sense of this; but of course, adding God to the equation, he argues, is crucial to complete the theory. The same could be said of the ethical theories of Kant and Aristotle for that matter; yes, God is ineliminable from the full theory, but theories predicated on human nature and features of human interaction get the ball rolling. There is something to affirm about such theories, and it is important that we do.

25. See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Linda Zagzebski's divine motivation theory, in a similar way, grounds morality in motivations, and she admits that the first half of her theory can be constructed without reference to God at all.²⁶ She completes her theory by spelling out God's essential role in it, but she concedes that secular thinkers, even without that theistic addition, are not without moral resources for some measure of theory building.

Our point, then, is twofold: full moral theory does, we agree, require God as its foundation to be complete, and God's inclusion is most important of all; but the resources of this world, created by God, can meet with some measure of success the task of moral theory. That this is so, we contend, provides grounds for secular thinkers to be slow to accept Craig's first premise—even though we agree that, ultimately, the secular theories alone do not give us all we should want in a moral theory. We can argue that theistic ethics provide the better explanation without having to argue that secular ethics is impotent, and we should because, if Christianity is true, ultimately nothing is truly "secular." Not an iota of the cosmos isn't God's.

Craig admits that the majority of secularists retain belief in moral objectivity, but he argues that such a consensus is likely due not to the fact that a world without God has the explanatory resources to ground objective moral values and duties, but rather because of the evident truth of moral realism and the refusal to abandon their atheism no matter what. Again, in the case of the latter dogmatic secularists, no argument there, but in terms of the evident truth of moral realism, we would disagree with Craig that this provides no reason for the atheist to resist the first premise and only evidence for the second premise. For clear apprehension of moral truth is a feature of this world. And so when Craig says he is willing to grant the atheist the possibility of a world like this but without God, part of that concession is to give the atheist this prerogative: to insist that in a world in which there is no God, the actual world as they construe it, clear moral apprehensions are possible. That is a feature of the actual world, and if atheists are accorded the space to use the features of this world to build their moral theory and sustain their commitment to morality, then those apprehensions are fair game. Now, of course, this epistemic point isn't enough to settle the ontological questions, and there is principled

26. See Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

reason to argue that God's having created this world and human beings in a particular way is the better explanation of the truth and veridical nature of those moral deliverances, but to argue that is to move away from TDA and toward the abductive case. The moral apprehensions, even if they can't be sustained on analysis by the naturalist, provide at least *prima facie* reason to be taken seriously and to be explained in naturalistic terms. The world, we might say, provides reason to come to terms with morality; but again, God and cosmos together provide the better explanation of the full range of moral facts in need of explanation, or so we will argue.

For atheists who think that a sober consideration of features of the human condition should lead to some solid convictions about moral foundations or motivations, we can offer them the abductive version without requiring them to first reject their earlier belief in the truth-indicating features of human nature, but rather to extend that notion, as Thomists do, by seeing such richness yet more fully when human nature is considered in the light of having been fashioned after the image of God. We may point out to them that no small number of secularists, pragmatists, existentialists, and others have recognized the difficulties a secular world-view experiences retaining essentialist commitments. We want to encourage naturalists who are sensitized to the moral indicators around them. There's something vital to affirm there; after all, we don't want them to do as this former Kantian Marks did that Craig quoted, in abandoning not his atheism, but his moral realism, after thinking about the implications and deficiencies of his naturalism.²⁷

Craig thinks that, when it gets down to showing that the best explanation of objective moral values and duties is God, one will almost inevitably slip into arguing that, given atheism, objective moral values and duties would plausibly not exist. In other words, the abductive approach will use the deductive approach. We understand and respect his view and suspicion; and we could be wrong here, but we don't exactly agree, and here's why. We genuinely think we are doing something a little different. Again, what we see the deductive argument saying is this: Imagine that the world

27. In this connection we demur from Craig's characterization of Marks as a "thoughtful" atheist; rejection of such patently obvious moral truths as, say, the wrongness of child torture for fun bespeaks, in our estimation, a problem of deep proportions. Even if there is a kind of logical rigor and consistency to Marks's approach, it doesn't strike us as rational, but as profoundly perverse. Just as an atheist is well within his moral rights to condemn an Ockhamistic divine command theorist who would potentially deny the moral wrongness of child torture, with equal vehemence and justification we do so with Marks.

is atheistic. Now try to make sense of morality. Ultimately you can't, at least without watering down what is meant by morality. So if there's no God, objective moral values and duties don't exist. Since they do, God exists.

The abductive approach is different, and it goes more like this: This world may well have been created and infused with meaning by God; suspend judgment on that for the moment. Take a look at this world and see what you can do by way of explaining morality and its distinctive features, and don't be surprised if you find that you can make some progress. But then, remind yourself of the fuller range of moral facts in need of explanation—values and duties to be sure, but also moral freedom, knowledge, responsibility, moral regrets, shame, forgiveness, the prescriptive power and rational authority of morality, the desire for the congruence of happiness and holiness, the needed resources for moral transformation, human dignity and equality and worth—and ask yourself this question: What better explains this full range of moral facts? This world alone? Or the conjunction of this world and its Creator, who made us in his image, created us for a purpose, invested us with the capacity for empathy and rationality and moral apprehension? This world, counterpossibly assuming its existence without God, certainly has the resources to explain some things about morality, but God and this world together better explain morality.

So we don't have to argue that a world like this without God entails no real morality at all in our effort to show that the moral argument is a powerful tool in our apologetic arsenal contributing to a cumulative case for God's existence. And the abductive approach does not rely on the deductive one. If anything, the argumentation needed to back up the premises in the deductive version relies on a lot of patient background abductive work.

By way of summary, there are five problems with TDA that we see:

1. It makes us say very uncomfortable and unintuitive and unnecessary things—"Rape isn't wrong . . . if God doesn't exist," for example. The abductive approach avoids any need to do so.
2. TDA, more than abduction, allows the atheist to reject the moral realism instead of the naturalism—like Marks did. Abduction keeps the moral facts in question front and center as the starting data in need of explanation.
3. TDA doesn't allow enough room to acknowledge what would be the simply amazing features of a world like this if it could exist without

God—whereas abduction does not deny the power of a world like this without God, *per impossibile*, to explain some of morality.

4. Deduction bases the moral argument on a premise involving a particularly intractable counterpossible. Are there nontrivially true counterpossibles? Sure. But pontificating confidently about a world in which the ground of being doesn't exist? That is problematic indeed—particularly synthetic claims like the famous Dostoyevskian counterfactual.
5. TDA can sever the bridge with our naturalist interlocutors it claims to build by focusing, and needlessly so, more on our differences than our similarities.²⁸

The final upshot of this chapter is an important one to our overall project, namely, that once we recognize the semantic, ontological, and epistemic resources at the disposal of the atheist to build his moral theory, we should not dismiss secular ethical theories too quickly. Even if they turn out to be unable to explain the full panoply of moral facts in need of explanation as well as classical theism does, the task to show this is a slow and long one, involving a painstaking analysis of each theory. General critiques of naturalistic ethics are important, but are no replacement for the specific critiques called for as well. The sort of careful, critical work that can and must be done for the moral argument is just the sort of work that's already been done for the teleological argument by Richard Swinburne or the ontological argument by Al Plantinga or the cosmological argument by Craig himself. We hope to undertake some of this work in the rest of this book. First, though, we need to treat two more preliminary issues about naturalism: free will and the problem of evil, to which we now turn.

28. We could construct an acrostic on the basis of this list of five objections to the deductive variant of the moral argument. C for Counterpossibles; A for Acknowledging the rich features of a world like this if it could exist without God; R for Rejecting realism instead of naturalism; B for Bridge-breaking; and S for Saying uncomfortable things. CARBS, which just aren't good for anybody. Incidentally, on occasion it's suggested that a deductive argument is such that, if each premise is more likely true than not, then so is the conclusion, but this isn't right. It is the premise set that needs to be more likely true than false to preserve this feature for the conclusion. Tim McGrew gives a clever demonstration of this using a dice. When rolled, it's more likely true than false both that it will be a 1, 2, 3, or 4, and 3, 4, 5, or 6, but the deductive inference that it will be either 3 or 4 is more likely false than true. This makes the case for arguing for the likely truth of the conjunction of the premises of TDA both a pressing need and no easy task.

3

The Problem of Evil, Freedom, and Moral Responsibility

*If Divine Goodness is infinite,
if intimate relation to It is thus incommensurably
good for created persons,
then we have identified a good big enough to defeat horrors
in every case.¹*

MARILYN ADAMS

OVER A DECADE ago, the cover of *Time* magazine had the word “Evil” on its cover in large dark letters. At the bottom of the cover, it posed this question: “Does it exist—or do bad things just happen?” Throughout the essay inside, along with accompanying pictures, a number of more specific questions were posed: “Hitler was evil . . . but is AIDS evil? But is Saddam evil? But is nature evil?” Lance Morrow, the author of the essay, noted that he knew a man who denied that evil exists. He commented on him as follows.

The man who does not believe in the existence of evil knows all about the horrors of the world. He knows that humanity is often vicious, violent, corrupt, atrocious. And that nature’s cruelties and caprices are beyond rational accounting. Bangladesh does not deserve the curse that seems to hover over it. But that man thinks that to describe all that as evil gives evil too much power, too much stature, that it confers on what is rotten and tragic the prestige of the absolute. You must not allow lower instincts and mere calamities to get dressed

1. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 82–83.

up as big ideas and come to the table with their betters and smoke cigars. Keep the metaphysics manageable: much of what passes for evil (life in Beirut, for example) may just be a nightmare of accidents. Or sheer stupidity, that sovereign, unacknowledged force in the universe.²

The denial that it even exists is certainly an interesting way to answer the classic problem of evil that has bedeviled us for centuries.

Notice that “the problem of evil” is a loaded phrase. For one thing, it is packed with emotional freight owing to the fact that the phrase calls to mind some of the most hotly contested battles in both historical and contemporary philosophy. The issue is massive in scope and importance, as well as enormously complicated, but it involves matters of such fundamental human significance that it does not require any special training to grasp the fundamental issues and why they matter so much. At stake are cosmic-level questions about the very meaning of life and what sort of hopes we can rationally maintain.

We can see this more clearly if we ponder the phrase more deeply. Notice in the first place the obvious fact that the phrase assumes there is such a thing as evil. And second, that it is somehow a “problem.” Now what is most telling is that these commonplace assumptions cannot simply be taken for granted today, as suggested by the essay we just quoted. Indeed, there is a striking ambivalence about the reality of evil in contemporary thought that is profoundly at odds with most of Western history.

A Paradigm Shift

This uncertainty about the reality of evil was centuries in coming. Susan Neiman has told the story of how the problem of evil has undergone a number of transmutations in the modern period and has come to be viewed in a radically different way as a result. Indeed, she has made the case that the history of modern thought is very much a history of different ways of thinking about and understanding the problem of evil. This way of casting the history of modern thought is not only more interesting than the more typical focus on epistemology and the quest for knowledge and

2. Lance Morrow, “Evil,” *Time* (June 10, 1991), pp. 48–49.

certainty initiated by Descartes, she contends; it is also truer to the reality of what drove modern philosophy.

The problem of evil is often understood as a distinctly theological puzzle, but Neiman denies that this is the case. In the introduction to her book, she writes:

Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil. Note that it is as little a moral problem, strictly speaking, as it is a theological one. One can call it the point at which ethics and metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics meet, collide, and throw up their hands.³

This common human judgment that Neiman identifies as the essential judgment that leads to the problem of evil is central to this chapter, and it is one with extremely far-reaching implications, as she notes. However, the judgment also raises a question that can hardly be ignored, and we will press this question in this chapter: what reason do we have to think of any given event or incident that it ought not to have happened? What grounds this judgment that we often make with such certainty and conviction? What distinguishes those things that ought to happen, or that simply happen as a matter of course, from those that ought not to happen?

These questions have a reasonably clear answer in Christian theology, where the reality of evil is apparent, as well as the sense in which it ought not to happen. Beginning with the Garden of Eden, if not in the primordial fall of Satan, evil has played a vital, if not central role in the drama of sin and redemption. Evil is very much a problem not only in the sense that it impairs the human flourishing that God intends for us and leads to various forms of suffering, but also in the sense that it has corrupted the entire fallen world and causes it to fall short of the purposes for which it was created. Evil is thus very much at odds with God and his purposes, and in this sense it ought not to happen.

It is a problem, however, that God himself is working to overcome with his plan of salvation and redemption, a plan that will be fully accomplished at the end of the world when all evil will be decisively defeated. Death itself

3. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 5.

will be overcome, having already received a mortal blow in the resurrection of Jesus. In view of this confidence that God has evil under control, and will surely succeed in defeating it, evil is not an insuperable challenge to God's power or his goodness, let alone to his very existence.

However, evil can come to be seen as a problem in this more sinister sense when it seems to be out of control, when it is hard to see how it can be defeated, indeed, how its pervasive reality can even be compatible with the existence of a God of supreme goodness and power. Evil is a problem in this sense not only because it is destructive to human flourishing, but also because it is a frontal challenge to God's power and/or goodness, if not to his very existence. To say *this ought not to have happened* in this context is to affirm a conditional statement such as the following: if God exists, and is all powerful and perfectly good, then this ought not to have happened. As in Christian theology, evil ought not to happen because it is at odds with the will and purposes of God. But here, confidence that God is in control and will defeat evil is called into question, or perhaps God's very existence. But what is common to both of these ways of seeing evil as a problem, as something that ought not to happen, is the assumption that evil is at odds with a good God.

The story Neiman tells is a story of a diminishing tendency or capacity or conviction to render the judgment *this ought not to have happened*. Her narrative is bookended by two events, each of which shook Western thought and culture to its very foundations, namely, the Lisbon earthquake, and the Holocaust. These events, though radically different, are similar in the sense that both of them were devastating because they shattered fundamental beliefs and assumptions about our world and the nature of evil. But what is more interesting for our concerns is the profoundly different ways these events posed the problem of evil. Neiman explains:

If there's a problem of evil engendered by Lisbon, it can occur only for the orthodox: *how can God* allow a natural order that causes innocent suffering? The problem of evil posed by Auschwitz looks like another entirely: *how can human beings* behave in ways that so thoroughly violate both reasonable and rational norms? It is just this sense that the problems are so utterly different which marks modern consciousness.⁴

4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

According to Neiman, the sharp distinction between moral and natural evil that seems so obvious was born around the Lisbon earthquake. Prior to that defining event, natural disasters like earthquakes were invested with moral and theological significance. While many persons at the time still viewed Lisbon in those terms, there was a growing tendency in modern thought after that time to view such events as purely natural phenomena, void of moral significance or meaning. By late modernity, the shift was radical indeed.

For contemporary observers, earthquakes are only a matter of plate tectonics. They threaten, at most, your faith in government building codes or geologists' predictions. They may invoke anger at lazy inspectors, or pity for those stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. But these are ordinary emotions.⁵

It is hard to exaggerate the difference between feeling the problem of evil as a matter of wondering how *God* can allow certain things, and wondering how *human beings* can be capable of some of the things we do. The difference between having your faith in God undermined and having your faith in government codes threatened is a paradigm shift of incalculable proportions. The difference between explaining earthquakes "only" in terms of tectonics and explaining them in terms of theology simply defies measure. And the difference between "ordinary emotions" of pity and regret and feelings of moral outrage of cosmic significance is similarly inestimable.

In any case, as a result of this dramatic shift in thinking, the problem of evil was largely dissolved, according to Neiman, and confined to a much smaller scale.

After Lisbon, the word *evil* was restricted to what was once called moral evil. Modern evil is the product of will. Restricting evil actions to those accompanied by evil intentions rids the world of a number of evils in ways that made sense. Less clear were the concepts of willing and intentions themselves. Falling rocks and tidal waves do not have them. What having them comes to remained murky. . . . With natural evil reduced to regrettable accident, and metaphysical

5. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

evil transformed to recognition of the limits we expect every adult to acknowledge, the problem of evil was as far on its way to dissolution as philosophical problems ever go.⁶

Now whether the problem of evil has in fact been dissolved is a question to which we shall return. Is the dissolution of the problem on these terms in fact a good thing? Or is it in fact a profound loss? Is it better to hold fast to the problem of evil, even if it is excruciating to do so, than to eliminate it on these terms?

Before pursuing these questions, we want to take a few minutes to recall the central claims of three pivotal figures in modern philosophy, as well as another influential modern thinker, all of whom profoundly altered the shape of the problem of evil, and recast the terms in which it was understood. Three of these are figures whose work contributed to the dissolution of the problem as Neiman characterized it, whereas the other arguably intensified it.

Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, and Freud

It is a great irony that one of the books most recognized as undermining belief in God is one in which the existence of a God is warmly and persistently affirmed. Although Hume's philosophy is notoriously naturalistic, none of the characters in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* espouses atheism. Even the skeptical Philo repudiates atheism as an absurd position that is obviously false. Near the end of the book, he says that if previous generations of atheists could hardly maintain their view in the face of overwhelming evidence for God's existence in the natural order, "to what pitch of pertinacious obstinacy must a philosopher in this age have attained who can now doubt of a Supreme Intelligence!"⁷

Of course, Philo criticizes the arguments for natural theology, particularly the teleological argument. But the playful urbanity of his speeches that aim to undermine the analogy between human designers and the Supreme Intelligence belies the passion of his moral critique that ultimately motivates his attack. It is only when Philo hammers away at the

6. Ibid., p. 268.

7. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 78.

problem of evil with such eloquent force that his real agenda is revealed. At this point, he can cheerfully concede God's power and wisdom, fully aware that these are not nearly enough to sustain meaningful belief in God if his goodness has been undermined.

His power, we allow, is infinite; whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite; He is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?⁸

It is important to emphasize here that Philo's view of goodness is nothing esoteric or mysterious, and that he insists on an account of goodness that resembles the ordinary meaning of the term. For the creator to be good, he must will the happiness of his creatures. But in view of the widespread misery that characterizes human experience, it is apparent that our world was not designed to achieve this end.

Philo goes on to argue that it is most probable that the designer of our world is neither perfectly good, nor perfectly malicious, nor a combination of these, but rather that he has neither goodness nor malice. This, Philo insists, seems by far the most probable.

Philo presses home the implications of the hypothesis that God is morally indifferent in the final dialogue, and there we see what his belief in God really amounts to. With all moral attributes eliminated, God is reduced to an explanatory hypothesis to account for the order in the universe, a hypothesis that warrants "plain philosophical assent." This bare assent, however, "affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance."⁹ Bluntly stated, this God makes no difference whatever to our lives or how we live them. Indeed, Hume even goes so far as to suggest that, since God is so remote from us and his existence has no practical implications

8. Ibid., p. 63.

9. Ibid., p. 88.

whatever, the dispute between theism and atheism is nothing more than a verbal one.

But here is the point we want to emphasize. Hume's argument for God's moral indifference is in one way an ingenious move to dissolve the problem of evil. For if the ultimate source of all things is not good in the ordinary sense of the word, if he (it?) has no moral properties, the enormous strain between God and evil is relieved. Here we have an entirely different conditional from the one cited above. We could put it like this: if the ultimate cause of everything that exists is morally indifferent and has no concern for our happiness, we should not be surprised if our world is not designed for our happiness, and is full of suffering. If God is not good, we have little reason to be confident in our judgments about what ought, or ought not, to happen.

Now it is important to underscore here that there is a certain irony in the fact that Hume's argument that the ultimate cause of everything is amoral depends crucially on moral judgments. Hume is quite confident in judgments about what is good and why God does not qualify. The question this obviously raises is how human beings got their ability to make such judgments, and why an amoral God would create beings who form such judgments. After all, if it is indeed true that because of God's infinite power and wisdom, "whatever he wills is executed" and furthermore that "he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end," then presumably this applies to human nature. And if so, then presumably God intended us to make the moral judgments we make, including the negative moral judgments we pass on this world.¹⁰

There is surely something odd about the claim that a morally indifferent God would structure the world in such a way that it is hostile to our happiness, while designing us in such a way that we would pass strong negative moral judgments on that world. But again, the main point here is that the problem of evil as traditionally understood is defanged if ultimate reality is morally indifferent, because we do not have the sort of reason provided by traditional theism to think that the world should be conducive to our happiness, or that extensive human suffering should not be the order of the day.

10. Indeed, one of us has argued that Hume's argument leads to the conclusion that God wants us to judge him evil. Therefore, God appears at best to be perverse, and cannot be amoral. See Jerry L. Walls, "Hume on Divine Amorality," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990):257–266.

Let us turn now to look briefly at Kant. Unlike Hume, whose treatment of the problem of evil is justly famous, Kant is not noted for addressing this issue. Indeed, Kant receives only one passing reference in John Hick's historically oriented classic book *Evil and the God of Love*.¹¹ However, the problem is integral to some of the most central and characteristic themes in Kant, in particular, his moral philosophy. While the core of the problem for Kant is similar to the way Hume stated the problem, Kant's moral convictions led him to altogether different conclusions from those Hume espoused. For Kant the problem is generated by his moral convictions about the nature of the highest good, namely, that it includes both virtue and happiness. Although virtue is the supreme good, it is not sufficient by itself to constitute the highest good. Kant was sharply critical of the Stoics in ancient philosophy for arguing that virtue itself is fully sufficient for happiness.

The problem is particularly posed by the fact that rational agents are morally obligated to follow the moral law solely out of the disinterested motive of duty. While they have the requisite ability to do this in his view, they have no control at all over the natural order, and therefore no ability to assure that virtue will be rewarded by suitable happiness. Here is how Kant posed the problem.

Hence there is in the moral law not the slightest basis for a necessary connection between morality and the happiness proportionate thereto, of a being belonging to the world as a part [thereof] and thus dependent on it, who precisely therefore cannot through his will be the cause of this nature and, as far as his happiness is concerned, cannot by his own powers make it harmonize throughout with his practical principles. Nonetheless, in the practical problem of pure reason, i.e., [that of] working necessarily for the highest good, such a connection is postulated as necessary: we *ought* to seek to further the highest good (hence this good must, after all, be possible).¹²

11. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 335.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 158.

Kant shares with Hume the judgment that there is a problem posed by the fact that the natural world is indifferent to human happiness. However, his concern is not only more specific but also cuts deeper because it is motivated by his rigorous moral convictions. The problem is that the natural order is not arranged in such a way that it delivers happiness to us corresponding to our virtue. The natural order is blind to moral distinctions, and serves up happiness in a disorderly fashion that does not correlate with the moral dessert of the recipients.

The problem of evil here is an urgent practical problem because we are morally obligated to “seek to further the highest good,” and for us to have this obligation, the highest good must be possible. Since there is no necessary connection between virtue and happiness in our world, it is at odds not only with our happiness, as Hume contended, but with our moral obligations. The world, it seems, is no less hostile to morality than it is to human happiness. The gap between is and ought is intensely sharpened when morality itself is threatened and undermined by the very structure of the world. Happiness and virtue ought to be tightly connected, but they are not. If Hume’s treatment of the problem of evil moves in the direction of dissolving it, Kant intensifies the problem by arguing that it severs a connection that is necessary for morality.

Let us turn now to Nietzsche, whose response to the problem is radically different from both Hume and Kant. Again, Nietzsche is not a figure commonly associated with the theodicy debate. While Kant rates one passing reference in Hick’s classic book cited above, Nietzsche does not appear in the index at all. Nevertheless, Nietzsche had telling things to say about the problem, albeit very atypical things in keeping with the radical nature of his philosophy. In particular, he disdainfully dismissed the whole problem as an embarrassing symptom of the sickly weakness of modern man.

For Nietzsche, the problem is not that the world is hostile to human happiness. Rather, it is Christian morality that is hostile to happiness because it requires us to exercise moral restraints on the expression of our instincts in ways that Nietzsche found unnatural and stifling. “To *have* to combat one’s instincts—that is the formula for *decadence*: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness and instinct are one.”¹³

13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 44.

Nietzsche is zealous not only to celebrate this world in its entirety just as it is, but also ready to pour scorn on any invidious comparisons between this world and some other world purported to be more real, whether that world is an ideal Platonic realm or the Kingdom of God that Christians pray to come. To affirm this world just as it is represents Nietzsche's ideal of the Dionysian spirit as portrayed in classic Greek tragedy.

Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—that is what I call Dionysian, that is what I recognize as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. Not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge—it was thus Aristotle understood it—but, beyond pity and terror, to *realize in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*. . . .¹⁴

To affirm “joy in destruction” as a component of “the eternal joy of becoming” has large implications not only for what would traditionally be categorized as natural evil, but also moral evil. Indeed, what Christian morality would see as paradigm cases of moral evil is recast by Nietzsche as raucous examples of the lads just having a good time.

. . . I expressly want to place on record that at the time when mankind felt no shame towards its cruelty, life on earth was more cheerful than it is today, with its pessimists. The heavens darkened over man in direct proportion to the increase in his feeling shame *at being man*. . . . I mean the sickly mollycoddling and sermonizing, by means of which the animal “man” is finally taught to be ashamed of all his instincts. . . . Now, when suffering is always the first of the arguments marshalled *against* life, as its most questionable feature, it is salutary to remember the times when people made the opposite assessment, because they could not do without *making* people suffer and saw first-rate magic in it, a veritable seductive lure to life.¹⁵

14. Ibid., p. 121.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 43.

It is important to emphasize that Nietzsche utterly rejects the idea of free will and moral agency. In his view, the lads on a rampage have no more freedom to do otherwise than a bird of prey has to refrain from eating and enjoying a tasty lamb. Strength naturally and inevitably expresses itself in domination and destruction.

And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a *deed*, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestation of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not.¹⁶

As Nietzsche sees it, the will merely accompanies events, but does not explain anything. Free will is a massive and perniciously motivated error that was fabricated to justify blaming people and holding them accountable.¹⁷

In short, the real problem with the problem of evil is that we consider it a problem. Nietzsche's dismissal of the problem is very much in keeping with his larger project to get "beyond good and evil" by rejecting Christian morality and restoring noble morality. If there is no God and no objective moral truth, we hardly have reason to think this world should be good in the Christian sense of supporting either our happiness or our moral virtue. And if there is no free will and moral agency, moral evil as traditionally construed is also eliminated.

It's hard to beat Nietzsche in terms of bracing rhetoric, but the view he takes of those who see evil as a problem was perhaps communicated more persuasively by a psychologist (although Nietzsche saw himself as a psychologist as well as a philosopher), namely, Sigmund Freud. Our culture, after all, is much more attuned to psychological categories than philosophical ones, and much more inclined to interpret things psychologically than philosophically. Freud's influence here is due to his general thesis that religious belief is an illusion fostered by childish needs for security in a frightening world. The terrifying sense of helplessness that we feel as children is mitigated by the loving protection of a father, and

16. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

17. *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, p. 60; pp. 64–65.

our lasting sense of vulnerability leads us to cling to the idea of a more powerful father.

Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish fulfillments shall take place.¹⁸

To expect the world to be a friendly place where justice will prevail and evil will be overcome and defeated is a childish fantasy not worthy of adult assent. The demands of morality as Kant saw it and the demands of maturity as Freud saw it run in very different directions. To experience evil as a problem in the traditional sense is an embarrassment for adults come of age. “If the problem is a form of metaphysical whining, we can only hope to grow out of it.”¹⁹

Again, evil is not a problem in the sense that it is if one believes ultimate reality is good. Rather, evil is simply a part of the fabric of life to be expected and coped with by those who have a realistic assessment of things.

Before concluding this sketch we want to underscore the reality that powerful streams in modern thought undermined moral evil no less than natural evil. Indeed, the move to neutralize natural evil as bad stuff that just happens, with little if any moral significance, spread to human actions as human beings increasingly saw themselves as entirely continuous with the natural order. “The more human beings become part of the natural world, the more we, like earthquakes, become one more unfortunate fact about it.”²⁰

The question that remains is whether neutralizing evil in this fashion and dissolving the problem of evil along these lines constitute a gain or a loss. Neiman speaks eloquently of the deeply divided condition of those

18. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott, revised and newly edited by James Strachey (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 47–48.

19. *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 320.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

who live in the wake of those streams of thought that attempt to naturalize evil, but cannot give up moral judgments.

Lisbon ought not to have happened, but it did. Accepting this came to seem a minimal sign of maturity, and Voltaire's long lament about the earthquake appeared but an elegant version of the child's curse at the chair over which he stumbled. Neither earthquakes nor chairs are properly viewed as objects of outrage because neither contains any moral properties at all. . . . For those who refuse to give up moral judgments, the demand that they stop seeking the unity of nature and morality means accepting a conflict in the heart of being that nothing will ever resolve.²¹

Neiman leaves us with disquieting choices indeed. We can give up the sort of moral judgments that generate the traditional problem of evil, and quit insisting that the world *ought* to be a different sort of place than it *is*. We can be mature adults who are no longer under the illusion that ultimate reality is good in some sense that is at odds with "evil" and come to grips with the fact that the world is what it is, and quit "whining" about what it ought to be. However, if we "refuse to give up moral judgments" we must reconcile ourselves to a deep rupture that will *never* be healed. This means coming to terms with the severe truth that reality is not what it ought to be and never will be. Evil simply is intractable reality and we are destined to live with a bitter conflict in our hearts and minds that mirrors an even deeper divide in the very heart of being.

Holding Fast to the Problem

Now let us return to the questions we raised above. Is there anything actually to be gained by resolving the problem of evil in the direction suggested by the likes of Hume, Nietzsche, and Freud? Or do we have an even worse problem if we do not have a problem of evil? Despite the unsettling choices Neiman thinks we face in this regard, she contends that the problem of evil cannot be escaped. Indeed, recognizing evil as a problem is essential to our very humanity. We want to agree with Neiman on this score and to reiterate that our commitment to moral truth requires us to view evil

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 267–268.

as deeply problematic. However, we want to argue that our commitment to moral truth opens up other options than her despairing resignation to accepting a conflict in the heart of being that will never be resolved.

Let us note that Neiman makes her case that recognizing evil is essential to our humanity by arguing that the problem of evil is not a distinctively religious problem. While she recognizes that the modern idea of progress owes its original inspiration to the Christian idea of Providence, she argues that it can be separated from its religious origin and stand on its own. Indeed, she contends that progress and Providence are alternative ways of offering a solution to the same problem. “Neither can be reduced to or derived from the other. For they are the result not of historical accident (even a very big historical accident like the Judeo-Christian notion of a personal God) but of something about human nature itself.”²² Notice: both the Judeo-Christian view of a personal, providential God and the modern idea of progress are the result “of something about human nature itself.”

Neiman goes on to insist that the “impulse to theodicy” derives from something deeper than monotheism.²³ This deeper source as she sees it is the “principle of sufficient reason” that insists there is a reason for everything our world presents to us. This “drive to seek reason in the world” is deeply rooted in human nature. Indeed, it is “as deep a drive as any we have. It’s this urge that keeps the problem of evil alive even after hopes of solving it are abandoned.”²⁴ Notice again: human nature is so constituted that we have an “impulse,” a “drive,” an “urge” to make sense of evil, and this keeps the problem alive “even after hopes of solving it are abandoned.”

Now this is perplexing enough, but Neiman goes on to suggest that behind the principle of sufficient reason is the “assumption that the *is* and the *ought* should coincide.” What drives metaphysics, she reiterates, is the attempt to make sense of a world in which things go terribly and tragically wrong. “We proceed on the assumption that the true and the good, and just possibly the beautiful, coincide. Where they do not, we demand an account.”²⁵

This is an extraordinary claim, but the question that begs to be answered is exactly what warrants this “demand.” Why should we assume that the

22. Ibid., p. 317.

23. Ibid., p. 318.

24. Ibid., p. 322.

25. Ibid.

true, the good, and the beautiful coincide? Plato, of course, thought the three were transcendental realities that are in some sense identical, and certain streams of Christian theology have held that the three great ideals found their unity in the nature and purposes of God. But why should naturalists and atheists make such an assumption, or presume to "demand" that reality should correspond to our ideals?

Suffering and the Natural Order: Should We Expect Anything Else?

Let us press these questions first of all with respect to pain and suffering in the natural order, a segment of the problem of evil that modern thinkers wanted to eliminate by denying that it had moral meaning or significance. Consider in this light the perspective of atheist Richard Dawkins, who gives eloquent expression to a contemporary version of the Humean view of what should be expected in a world where ultimate reality, at bottom, is morally indifferent. His focus in this passage is largely on animal suffering, but the point remains that it pertains to suffering of sentient creatures caused by the natural order.

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.²⁶

26. Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinist's View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 131–132.

What is perhaps most striking about this passage is that Dawkins thinks the suffering in the natural world is “beyond all decent contemplation.” Again, as with Hume, it is odd that a universe composed only of electrons and “blind physical forces,” one that at bottom is pitiless and indifferent, should give rise to beings who contemplate its misery with pity and deeply felt moral judgment. But still, the key point here is that Dawkins thinks this is just the sort of universe we should expect, and he seems little inclined to issue demands that truth, goodness, and beauty should coincide or that justice should prevail. Anything like a Kantian expectation that there should be a correlation between the way things are and the way they should be is foreign indeed.

Dawkins and Neiman agree, then, in feeling the force of the problem of evil, and both make moral judgments on the natural world. Neiman, however, sees the problem as a painful dilemma deeply rooted in human nature that can never be resolved, whereas Dawkins sees suffering and evil as exactly what we should expect given the moral indifference that lies at the bottom of reality.

The question that deserves an answer, however, is what best accounts for why the moral judgments that keep the problem of evil alive are so deeply rooted in human nature, and what that suggests about ultimate reality. Here it is worth recalling Pascal’s brilliant observation that man is a “thinking reed.” We are so frail that it does not take the whole universe to kill us. A few drops of water or a vapor may do the trick. “But even if the universe were to crush him, man would be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this.” He went on to observe that our dignity lies in thought. It is there that we must seek our recovery, not in our ability to fill time and space. “Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality.”²⁷

A similar insight motivates Thomas Nagel’s recent work, discussed in Chapter 1, which issues a sharp challenge to naturalistic reductionism. In particular, Nagel insists that we must do justice to what an extraordinary place our world is, and that especially requires having a realistic assessment of ourselves and our remarkable capacities. We are particularly concerned with his emphasis on consciousness and, even more, our ability to recognize moral truth. At the heart of his case is the recognition that mind,

27. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), no. 200.

meaning, and value are fundamental to reality, and not merely a side effect of physical reality, as some reductionist accounts imply. While he rejects excessive claims to foundationalist certainty, he remains confident that we have knowledge of the most important truths about reality. “The hope is not to discover a foundation that makes our knowledge unassailably secure but to find a way of understanding ourselves that is not radically undermining, and that does not require us to deny the obvious.”²⁸

Nagel goes on to acknowledge on the same page that theism is an intentional form of explanation that has an advantage over reductive materialism because it readily admits as obviously real things materialists often deny. “An intentional agent must be thought of as having aims that it sees a good, so the aims cannot be arbitrary; a theistic explanation will inevitably bring in some idea of value, and a particular religion can make this much more specific, though it poses the famous problem of evil.”²⁹

We want to propose that one way God’s intentions are clearly revealed is precisely in the fact that we are so constituted that we recognize evil as a problem. So the fact that we are inescapably gripped by the problem of evil in the way Neiman describes is in fact an indirect piece of evidence for the existence of God.

Consider in this light one of the things Nagel contends that we must account for if we are to take an honest measure of reality: “An adequate conception of the cosmos must contain the resources to account for how it could have given rise to beings capable of thinking successfully about what is good and bad, right and wrong, and discovering moral and evaluative truths that do not depend on their beliefs.”³⁰ We shall deal in detail with the epistemology of moral knowledge later, so for present purposes it is enough to underline the point that the existence of beings capable of discerning moral truths is accounted for readily in a theistic framework.

But here is one of the big points we are driving at in the current chapter: God’s nature as the best explanation of moral good, and the fact that he has created us in his image, constitute an excellent explanation both of why we cannot avoid making moral judgments about the world and of why we cannot escape seeing evil as a problem if there is indeed a gap between the way the world *is* and the way it *ought* to be. Naturalism has no such

28. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 25.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p. 106.

ready reason to believe there really is a gap between the way the world is and the way it ought to be.

Indeed, we would suggest that the painful sort of dilemma Neiman describes is exactly the way we should experience the world if we live in a fallen world, as Christianity teaches. The fact that we and our world were created by God, and that we were created in his image, explains why we yearn to be at home in the world and we have a deep-rooted sense of how it ought to be. The fact that the world is fallen, and comes up dramatically short of God's intentions, explains the profound conflict that seems to exist in the very heart of reality.

In saying this, we are not committing ourselves to any particular account of the fall or exactly how it occurred. The essential Christian claim here is that the fallen condition of the world is tied up with the fact that human beings have fallen short of what God intends and do not in this present world enjoy the perfect relationship with him that he wills for us. The whole world is "groaning for redemption" and looking forward to the day when God will renew all of creation.

Thus, whether the natural evil comes in the form of earthquakes, famine, disease, or animal suffering, we deny our humanity if we do not experience it as deeply problematic, and recognize that there is indeed a glaring gap between the way the world is and the way it ought to be. Saying this hardly lessens the problem of evil or provides a ready-made theodicy.

However, it does give us good reason to think the problem will be resolved, and perhaps even to seek a theodicy, while resolutely refusing to eliminate the problem or simply to be reconciled to it as a supposedly mature way of facing reality. Indeed, if our argument that God makes best sense of morality is correct, this is a third option that rejects the dilemma Neiman posed for those who refuse to quit making moral judgments. We need not be driven mercilessly to keep "the problem of evil alive even after hopes of solving it are abandoned." Rather, we can keep the problem squarely in focus, and refuse to downplay or trivialize it in any way, but do so with the principled hope that the good God who is the ultimate explanation of moral truth and our moral intuitions has the power and will to defeat it in the end.

Neiman is correct to insist that recognizing evil as evil and keeping the problem alive is essential to our humanity. What she fails to see is that our humanity and the meaning of our lives are also profoundly impaired if we must resign ourselves to the inevitability of evil and accept the despairing conclusion that healing will never come.

Moral Freedom, Responsibility, and Evil

Recall this line from Neiman, quoted above: "The more human beings become part of the natural world, the more we, like earthquakes, become one more unfortunate fact about it." As we have already seen, the reality of moral evil, like natural evil, was increasingly denied in the modern period. Even epoch-defining evil like the Holocaust was interpreted by some modern thinkers in ways that were deeply at odds with how moral evil was previously understood. In a context that considered the problem of evil largely dissolved, many persons were hesitant and uncertain about how to assign moral blame and responsibility to the Nazis. They looked instead to factors like social pressures and the maze of bureaucracy to explain choices that were otherwise inexplicable.

The nature of moral responsibility is a matter of intense debate among contemporary philosophers, scientists, and social scientists, and this obviously has important bearing on the reality of moral evil. The debate is intimately connected to the question of whether we are free, and if so, in what sense. We want to discuss these issues and their bearing on our project by examining a fascinating, and we think telling, exchange between three naturalist philosophers over the issue of free will and moral responsibility. In particular, this exchange was generated by Daniel Dennett's review of Bruce Waller's recent volume *Against Moral Responsibility*.³¹ What this exchange suggests, we want to argue, is that our view is much better situated than naturalism to make sense of moral evil because it makes better sense of human freedom and its role in moral responsibility.

So let's begin with Dennett's critique of Waller. Dennett clearly thinks highly of Waller's book, and begins his review by offering the backhanded compliment that Waller has made an important contribution to the debate by producing an original mistake. In particular, Waller has made an impressive case for a view never before properly defended, namely, that freedom is compatible with determinism and naturalism, but is *not* compatible with moral responsibility. This combination of views is an interesting one precisely for the reason that most persons who have defended a compatibilist view of freedom have been most anxious to defend the claim that determinism is perfectly compatible with at least some measure of moral responsibility. Indeed, the main reason free will is valuable

31. Bruce N. Waller, *Against Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Bradford Book, 2011).

and must be maintained is because we want to view ourselves and others as morally responsible agents. Waller, however, dissents from this broad consensus, and argues that while freedom is compatible with determinism, and is to be valued for other reasons, preserving moral responsibility is *not* one of them.

It is important to emphasize that Waller defines moral responsibility in the strong sense that holds that praise and blame, reward and punishment are justified because moral agents deserve these sorts of responses. Underlying this account of moral responsibility is a retributivist view of moral desert that rejects consequences as relevant for punishment or blame. Reward and punishment are intrinsically good precisely because they are deserved.

Dennett hastens to make clear that if moral responsibility is understood in these terms, he also rejects it. While libertarians and other incompatibilists, along with the “unreformed, unsophisticated tradition,” tend to think of moral responsibility along these lines, he does not. He writes:

And let me say right away that I agree with Waller’s main conclusion in one important sense: *that* kind of absolutistic moral responsibility—insisting as it does on what I have called guilt-in-the-eyes-of-God—is incompatible with naturalism and has got to go. Good riddance.³²

However, this does not mean abandoning the concept of moral responsibility altogether, and, like many naturalists, Dennett is anxious to hold on to it. He acknowledges, however, that even some of his naturalist cohorts think this is a dubious project. Indeed, reporting on Waller’s assessment of his own views, Dennett writes that, as Waller sees it, “I must fiddle with what I declare to be the meaning of ‘could have done otherwise’ until I can get it to fit my naturalistic bent, yielding a dismal result: ‘an anemic account of moral responsibility joined to a shallow account of free will.’”³³

Dennett, naturally enough, is determined to clear himself of this charge and to show that there is a perfectly adequate account of moral responsibility that is fully compatible with naturalism. He begins to make his case by

32. “Daniel Dennett Reviews *Against Moral Responsibility* by Bruce Waller” <http://www.naturalism.org/DCDWallerreview.htm>, p. 2.

33. Ibid.

urging us to recognize that the concept does not simply drop, ready-made, from the sky. Rather, he contends that “it is integral to a large system of social and political institutions, so understanding how it works there, in the (naturalistic) land of ethical theory, economics, political theory, psychology, and other social sciences, could prove a better anchoring for the concept than any that could be mustered in physics and the neurosciences (a.k.a. metaphysics).”³⁴

Moreover, Dennett does not simply want to dispose of our “deep retributive desires” which he believes derive from an “amoral source in our evolutionary past.” He holds that we have “devised a way to harness them—tame them, direct them down *justifiable* channels—in order to secure something very valuable: a secure and civil society in which people are held responsible for their promises and the other deeds they do ‘of their own free will.’” So what is this justifiable channel that Dennett endorses? Well, it is a consequentialist account of just desserts and punishments, to which, he says, Waller is “systematically blind, given his starting point.”³⁵

Dennett spells this suggestion out in some detail by focusing on a practice that is fundamental to civilized society, namely, making contracts and keeping the promises they involve. Consider in particular a contract that includes a clause specifying the penalty you will pay if you fail to keep the contract. What happens in the event that you do in fact fail to keep your word? You are held responsible, and become liable to punishment. This is entirely just and warranted according to Dennett since by agreeing to the contract you tacitly agree to be part of a system that includes such punishments. He, for one, does not want to live in a world without contracts “because contracts are just the carefully articulated expression of the underlying concept of a promise made in good faith, and I do not want to live in a world without promising. It is the very glue of civilization.”³⁶

Punishment, then, is a practical necessity to keep civilization from disintegrating, and this provides ample consequentialist justification for applying it as needed. Dennett presses this point by insisting that Waller does not offer us a “better game” than the moral responsibility game, which, he thinks, “is probably as close to a fair game as you could devise.”³⁷

34. Ibid., p. 3.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 4.

Instead of providing a better alternative, all Waller can do is bemoan the many ways the moral responsibility game is unfair, particularly as demonstrated in the fact that opportunity is far from equal and some persons clearly have enormous advantages others do not enjoy.

To make matters worse, Waller cannot do without the very concepts of blame and punishment he claims to repudiate. Dennett presses this point home by considering Waller's proposals for dealing with criminals. While Waller says it is important for the criminals to be detained and to acknowledge their wrongdoing as a part of restoring them to the community, Dennett notes that criminals may not be willing to cooperate and may even try to escape detention. What then? If he is forcibly restrained, that is itself a form of punishment since it requires holding criminals against their will. Moreover, is Waller willing for us to restrain just anyone we think has a character flaw until we judge them sufficiently reformed? Or is it only appropriate to restrain those who have been duly arrested and convicted? These questions suggest that there simply is no practical alternative to punishment, so it appears that Waller is resorting to the dubious measure of "introducing concepts of guilt and dessert through the back door."³⁸

Naturalists at Odds

Let us turn now to the exchange generated by this review to further examine the issues at stake, beginning with Tom Clark, the organizer of the exchange. Let us note four points he makes. First, he contends that the notion of just desserts is inconsistent with Dennett's reformed account of moral responsibility, and that he should simply give it up. While Dennett claims that he supports punishment as a practical necessity, his retention of the language of "just desserts" implies that it is intrinsically good for offenders to suffer, which smacks of retributivism.

Second, while Clark agrees that the concept of moral responsibility did not just drop out of the sky, he also points out that the traditional account of moral responsibility is strongly shaped by a long history of believing in libertarian freedom. This means it will not be easy to separate the notion of moral responsibility from the assumption of libertarian freedom. Dennett's attempt to situate the concept of moral responsibility

³⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

in the world of ethical theory, economics, political theory, and the like will not salvage it from radical revision, if not total elimination “if we judge that dropping deontological dessert and retributivist punishment changes the concept beyond useful recognition.”³⁹ And many people do judge that dropping deontological dessert and retributivist punishment radically alters the concept of moral responsibility.

Third, this means that naturalists should focus on publicly and explicitly denying and debunking libertarian free will in order to undermine the appeal to freedom to justify punishment. Dennett’s account of moral responsibility, and his emphasis on the threat of punishment as a deterrent, still gives the impression that those who fail are at fault more than the system in which they are enmeshed. “We can do better by *not* singling out the agent; instead, publicize naturalism-determinism, which undercuts ultimate responsibility as a justification for both punishment and inequality.”⁴⁰

Fourth, this will require nothing short of a revolution in how we think about ourselves. Compatibilists, Clark suggests, often suggest that agents have a greater degree of freedom than their commitment to determinism will allow when they play the role of apologists for punishment.

Compatibilists abet the propensity to punish and ignore causes, it seems to me, by downplaying determinism and the systems view while focusing attention on the “sins of the error maker.” When it comes to creating a less punitive, more humane culture, it’s Waller’s approach we most need, the one that puts agents explicitly in their causal context: no one has the unconditional ability to do otherwise. We can best improve on the state of nature by advertising, not hiding, the naturalistic revolution in our self-concept.⁴¹

The suggestion here that compatibilists fail to be true to their naturalism by “hiding” their deterministic commitments when focusing on the “sins of the error maker” is a telling one. They need to be honest about the fact that in their view, “no one has the unconditional ability to do otherwise.”

39. Tom Clark, “Exchange on Bruce Waller’s *Against Moral Responsibility*” www.naturalism.org/Wallerexchange.htm, p. 2.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

In his response, Dennett continues to chide Waller and Clark by focusing on the very practical issue that we cannot sidestep the harsh reality that it is necessary to take some very concrete measures to protect society from criminals. Do they really mean to suggest that we should not “single out” muggers since they believe that muggers are not morally responsible for their actions? Surely they cannot mean to support such an unrealistic policy; they grant that we can use force to quarantine muggers, enroll them in rehabilitation programs, and warn society to avoid them. If they admit all this, but claim that we still must not blame the muggers, they are simply engaging in a rhetorical dodge. “One begins to wonder if we’re just banishing a word while keeping all the traditional implications of the word intact.”⁴²

Waller gets the last word in the exchange, and he concedes that he does not have an alternative system to offer, but he continues to press the point that the system of moral responsibility is unfair. Dennett agrees with this, he notes, but seems to be willing to settle for “fair enough” since it is better than anything we might put in its place. Waller reiterates that his goal is to convince the world that the system of moral responsibility is not only unfair, but stands in the way of “a better understanding of human behavior.” He emphasizes that he does not want to turn people into automatons, but rather to use “our new understanding to enhance self-control, strengthen a sense of self-efficiency, and promote stronger cognitive resources.”⁴³

Scoring the Debate

The primary reason we have summarized this exchange in a fair bit of detail is because it makes many of the points against naturalism that we want to make. We find it very telling and illuminating that the participants in this exchange accuse each other of trading on accounts of freedom and responsibility that they officially deny, or that determinism/naturalism cannot easily accommodate. Dennett thinks that Waller cannot get along without the notions of blame and punishment, and tries to sneak them in the back door hoping we won’t notice. Clark accuses Dennett of suppressing his commitment to determinism in his attempt to make moral sense

42. Ibid., p. 6.

43. Ibid., p. 8.

of the notions of punishment, just desserts, and deterrence that he wants to defend while keeping his claim to compatibilism and consequentialism. Clark also thinks Dennett's view implies that just desserts are an inherent good, a view that fits better with retributivism, and moreover, that the network of social, political, and moral concepts to which Dennett appeals to anchor moral responsibility has been heavily shaped by the assumption of libertarian freedom that he repudiates.

We agree, and we want to go on to make the point that both freedom and moral responsibility fit far more naturally in the theistic account of morality we are defending in this book. Freedom is not some sort of awkward intervention in the natural order, nor some sort of desperate metaphysic hatched in order to account for things that are hardly deniable, but hard to make sense of in light of our fundamental ontology. Quite to the contrary, freedom is altogether at home in a universe that is the creation of a perfectly good God who freely created this universe and made us in his image. Such a universe is the natural habitat for beings who are not only free, but morally responsible. One of the central features of a worldview, of course, is to explain various phenomena in a way that follows naturally from its core commitments and we think it an obvious strength of ours that it readily accounts for these realities.

Recall Nagel's point that we must avoid an understanding of ourselves that is self-undermining. We contend that Clark's call for a thoroughgoing "naturalistic revolution in our self-concept," one that forthrightly denies our "unconditional ability to have done otherwise," is a perfect example of a self-understanding that is in fact self-undermining.

Recall, too, that one of the things Nagel thinks we must satisfactorily account for is our ability to know objective moral truth, to think correctly about what is good and bad, right and wrong. Nagel goes on to make a stronger claim that poses even more of a problem for reductive materialism. He insists that our behavior is not explained only by our physiology and our desires, but also by our judgments. Indeed, he claims that the "most important metaphysical aspect of a realist view of practical reason is that consciousness is not epiphenomenal and passive, but that it plays an active role in the world."⁴⁴ Nagel's claim here obviously has significant implications for free will, as he acknowledges. In his view, our ability to be motivated by objective moral truth "involves a conscious control of

44. *God and Cosmos*, p. 115.

action that cannot be analyzed as physical causation with an epiphenomenal conscious accompaniment, and that it includes some form of free will—though it is, as always, very obscure what sense to give that notion.”⁴⁵

Now let us consider further the nature of freedom and responsibility by reflecting on Dennett’s example of promise making and contracts, and the threat of punishment if we fail to follow through on our promises. Recall that promising is “the very glue of civilization” in Dennett’s view, and the obvious good of maintaining civilization provides a consequentialist justification for holding people morally responsible and for punishing them when they do not abide by their contracts. The threat and reality of punishment serve as a deterrent to those who are tempted to break their promises, and this threat is essential for the glue of civilization to hold.

We very much agree that promising is “the very glue of civilization” in the sense Dennett suggests, but we think it is clear that the whole notion of promising makes much better sense on libertarian terms than it does on compatibilist terms. Indeed, this argument was suggested centuries ago by Thomas Reid in behalf of libertarian freedom. He observed that “when I plight my faith in any promise or contract, I must believe that I shall have power to perform what I promise. Without this persuasion, a promise would be downright fraud.”⁴⁶ Reid goes on to observe that promises are always implicitly conditional on the assumption that we will live, that God will sustain us, and so on. However, he notes that for determinists there is another more troubling condition implied “in every resolution, and in every promise; and that is, *if we shall be willing*. But the will, not being in our power, we cannot engage for it.”⁴⁷

Recall again Clark’s insistence that we do not have the “unconditional ability to have done otherwise” and his recommendation that determinists should be advertising and forthrightly affirming determinism. If they do this, however, it surely poses problems for the whole institution of promise making and punishing those who fail to keep their promises. No one who fails to keep a promise had the “unconditional ability to have done otherwise.” In view of this reality, it is difficult, to say the least, to see how a determinist can have any assurance that his will shall be properly

45. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

46. Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 337.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

disposed to keep his promise, say, to perform a very specific act by a very specific time on a very specific day. He can hardly be expected to act differently from what he has been determined to will to act, and for all he knows, the natural order in which he is embedded is so arranged that when the appointed day arrives he shall be determined to will *not* to keep his promise.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Moral Evil

The process of making promises and instituting punishments assumes both that we can keep our promises, and also that we may not. It assumes we have control over our actions in the sense that we have the ability to keep the promise as we pledge to do, but we also may choose to break it, which is implicit in contracts and the consequences that are spelled out. Recall again Nagel's conviction that we have conscious control of our actions and can act for moral reasons that cannot be reduced to physiology and desire. It is our contention that our institution of promise making and contractual enforcement is a prime example of Nagel's point. The reality of conscious control of our actions for moral reasons makes much better sense on the assumption of libertarian freedom than the naturalist view that our actions are determined by a causal chain that preceded our very existence, and over which we had no control.

Of course, compatibilists have their own account of how we have control over our actions, even if they deny the "leeway condition" that is captured in the "principle of alternative possibilities" that many libertarians take to be essential to libertarian freedom. We are inclined to agree, however, with a number of recent philosophers who argue that, while the "leeway condition" is essential for freedom and moral responsibility, the more fundamental requirement is a satisfactory account of sourcehood. Those who emphasize sourcehood urge that agents are the "ultimate" source of their free actions, or the "originators" of those actions. Agents cannot be the ultimate source or originators of their actions, however, if there is a causal chain external to them that is sufficient to determine their actions.

To see this more clearly, let us look more carefully at the notion of a causal chain that determines our actions. Kevin Timpe, a contemporary defender of sourcehood, spells out the formal conditions for a causal chain x to be externally sufficient for agent A's decision to d .

1. There is a proper part of x, let's call it y, involving A's agential structure which is causally sufficient for A's decision to d.
2. There is a proper part of x, let's call it z, which does not involve A's agential structure.
3. z is temporally prior to y.
4. z is causally sufficient for y.
5. There is no proper part of x which is temporally prior to z, involves A's agential structure, and is causally sufficient for z.⁴⁸

Now if these conditions are met, then A cannot be free in his decision to d in the sense that he is the originator or ultimate source of that decision.

Again, to insist that sourcehood is fundamental is hardly to think satisfying the principle of alternative possibilities is unimportant. To the contrary, the sourcehood condition and the leeway condition are arguably inseparable. For if a satisfactory account of sourcehood entails that determinism is false, that will also satisfy the alternative possibilities condition of the incompatibilist account of freedom. A sourcehood incompatibilist, then, should also affirm leeway incompatibilism.⁴⁹

It is precisely the incompatibilist, libertarian account of freedom that is denied by our three naturalist interlocutors above, but two of them recognize that libertarian freedom is deeply rooted in the network of concepts that make up our moral, social, legal, and political systems, and cannot be easily extricated from them. In particular, they recognize that the traditional notion of moral responsibility, with its attendant notions of blame, dessert, and punishment, relies heavily on this view of freedom. And again, they accuse Dennett of trading on this account of blame and punishment, and repressing his determinist convictions.

For an interesting example of this, consider Dennett's discussion of Bernie Madoff, who is infamous for costing people millions of dollars lost in his fraudulent financial schemes. Dennett notes that Waller cites Madoff as a difficult test case for his own view that denies moral responsibility, but that he is still loath to admit that personal blame and punishment are the solution. Dennett chides Waller for the obvious impracticality of evading

48. Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 138–139.

49. See Timpe, pp. 119–161. See especially pp. 158–161.

the necessity of punishment in such cases. Surely Waller must concede, at the very least, that we should forcibly take Madoff's belongings from him, and require him to live on very modest means in place of the extravagant lifestyle he enjoyed before. And surely we have the right, moreover, to insist Madoff must be denied any further career in finance. Dennett elaborates as follows.

If somebody's unavoidable *mistake* led to similar financial loss, we wouldn't do that, would we? It's because we deem Madoff *guilty* that we consider that we have the right to rescind his rights (under the moral responsibility game) and do all these things to him that he doesn't want us to do, and which we couldn't justifiably do if he weren't guilty. That's punishment. Not retributive punishment, but punishment and blame, all the same.⁵⁰

Now it does not take much effort to see why Dennett's fellow naturalists cited above think he is surreptitiously helping himself to the resources of the traditional view of moral responsibility and retributivist punishment that he officially repudiates. Notice in the first place that he contrasts the Madoff case with a scenario in which an "unavoidable *mistake*" had similar disastrous consequences for investors. While he italicizes the word "mistake," the word "unavoidable" is perhaps the more relevant one for this discussion. A mistake that could not be avoided invites no recrimination, unlike a mistake that was due to carelessness or negligence. Such a mistake is out of one's control, and most people, including Dennett, think it is hardly fair to blame someone for something over which they had no control.

Here Dennett's fellow naturalists understandably have reason to complain that he is "downplaying" his determinism. After all, it must be remembered that Madoff was determined to defraud each of his clients by causal factors that were in play long before Bernie was ever conceived, and over which he had no control. The causal chain that was unfolding years before he was born included the very links that would cause his "agential structure" to be such that he would be determined to act just as he did. If all this were "publicized" and the libertarian account of freedom overtly debunked as incompatible with determinism, Dennett's contrast between

50. Dennett Reviews *Against Moral Responsibility*, p. 6.

Madoff and his scenario of a victim of an “unavoidable *mistake*” would lose much of its steam.

Next, notice that Dennett emphasizes that it is because we judge Madoff to be “guilty” that we are justified in punishing him by rescinding his rights. Again, it might appear, as his naturalist interlocutors charge, that he is unduly singling out the agent and thereby abetting the retributivist account of punishment, while ignoring the faults of the system and the blame that should fall on it. By italicizing “guilty” Dennett apparently means us to understand that Madoff is *really guilty* and fully deserving of whatever punishment he receives. While he may claim to be merely channelling the widespread retributivist urge down the more justifiable channel of a consequentialist view of just desserts, his rhetoric easily lends itself to a retributivist reading, and likely draws on those connotations to elicit a positive response to his proposals.

By contrast, our view of moral freedom and responsibility is forthright, and has no need to co-opt resources from views we repudiate. To the contrary, our view of freedom is openly libertarian, and flows naturally out of our view that ultimate reality is an intelligent, perfectly good, perfectly free Being. Our view does not require us to do radical surgery on the view of moral responsibility that is deeply embedded in our network of moral, social, political, and legal institutions. We hold that when we are morally responsible it is because we have enough control over our actions to keep our promises, as well as meet our other moral responsibilities. When we fail to do so, we are to blame, because we could have done as we should have done, and we are the ultimate source of our actions for which we are responsible.

Moreover, our view makes much better sense of the reality of moral evil. While the concept of moral evil, like that of natural evil, is one that many modern and postmodern persons think is dispensable, and that we would be better off without such stark moral judgments, it is our view that we are much worse off if we do not have a robust sense of moral evil. Indeed, many persons are reluctant to use the term “evil” because they shy away from moral judgment or think that all such judgment is inevitably self-righteous and self-serving. However, if we have good reason to think that moral right and wrong are objectively true, and that we are morally responsible because we are free in the libertarian sense, we should hold firmly to the reality of moral evil. It is not merely that we *could* have done otherwise when we fail in our moral responsibilities, but that we *should* have done otherwise in the sense that we have failed to do what we were

obligated to do. At its deepest level, moral evil is a failure to love and obey God, to give him the honor and worship that is due to him as our Creator and Redeemer.

It is worth noting that events like 9/11 and more recent acts of terrorism all over the world often move people who have been reluctant to use the word “evil” to do so. In the face of such actions, weaker words simply do not seem to suffice. Indeed, we have lost contact with crucial aspects of reality if our moral resources will not allow us to acknowledge as moral evil what Madoff did, not to mention 9/11, the Holocaust, and, if we’re honest, some of the ugliest impulses within each of our own hearts. The inability of a worldview to sustain its moral vocabulary and moral outrage for lack of resources is damning evidence against its truth and plausibility.

Holding Fast to the Problem of Evil . . . and Hope

Let us return to Neiman, who has been our foil for much of this chapter. As we noted above, in her view the problem of evil faces us with profoundly disquieting choices. We can either give up making moral judgments, or we can come to terms with the demoralizing reality that the ugly gap between *is* and *ought* will never be closed, that there is a “conflict in the heart of being that nothing will ever resolve.” Recall, too, that she believes that an “impulse to theodicy” is deeply rooted in us, that we are driven to seek meaning and reason in the world, and this keeps the project of theodicy alive. “We saw theodicy come to an end, over and over, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only to reappear in other forms. Its persistence in the face of attack testifies to the fact that theodicy meets some deep human needs, but not to its truth or even its stability.”⁵¹

Neiman’s goals that she thinks can be met are much more mundane than truth. She writes: “Belief that there may be reason in the world is a condition of the possibility of our being able to go on in it.”⁵² She has no hope of ever being fully at home in the world, or discovering a theodicy that is true, but just wants reason enough to be able to go on. She notes, moreover, that our effort to make sense of the world is the engine of progress, the secular substitute for Providence. “The demand that reason and reality come to meet is the source of whatever progress occurs in

51. *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 288.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

actually bringing them together. Without such a demand, we would never feel outrage—nor assume the responsibility for change to which outrage sometimes leads.”⁵³

Still, she is aware that her hopes, chastened as they are by what she sees as an utterly irresolvable problem running through the very heart of reality, are modest indeed. As an example of something hopeful, she points to the courageous passengers on Flight 93 who resisted the terrorists on 9/11 who were likely planning to fly their plane into the White House or Capitol Building. “They proved not only that human beings have freedom; we can use it to affect a world we fear we don’t control. This is not theodicy. It is not even consolation—though it is all the hope we have.”⁵⁴ This is meager hope indeed, and Neiman is to be commended for recognizing that.

But we conclude by reiterating our conviction that the very moral truth that generates Neiman’s dilemma points us in a very different direction from what she thinks. She is correct to recognize the demand that reason and reality should converge, and to feel outraged by the glaring gap between *is* and *ought*. But she fails to countenance such recognitions and feelings as potentially veridical, evidentially significant insights into reality. We agree that not only moral evil, but natural evil ought not to be. We believe, moreover, that our profound judgments on these matters are not futile feelings destined for disappointment. Rather, we believe they track fundamental truth and point to a far greater hope than she dares to embrace.

In Part II we turn to our argument that this is so.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Introduction to Part II

In Part I, we looked at several general issues germane to a moral argument for God's existence. We examined naturalism and atheism and some of their implications, witnessed the internal moral debate among unbelievers, contrasted a deductive version of the moral argument with an abductive one, and discussed particular challenges to naturalism from the directions of evil, moral outrage, and freedom of the will.

With that foundation in place, in Part II we intend to advance our discussion of the moral argument by looking at specifics. In Chapter 2, we explained why this is important if moral arguments for God's existence are to be taken with the seriousness of other classical arguments from natural theology. What dictated the outline of the section is the specific abductive moral argument that we wish to advance. We now want to be explicit about the moral facts in need of explanation.

Unlike other versions of the moral argument, which tend to focus on just one or two of such facts, our abductive moral argument for God's existence attempts to incorporate aspects from four different arenas. This makes our approach not just abductive, but a cumulative argument. The relevant moral facts in need of explanation, on our account, are ontological, epistemic, practical, and rational.

More specifically, the *ontological* facts are, primarily, facts about moral goodness and rightness, values and duties. Craig's version of the moral argument focuses primarily on these, and understandably so, since they figure so centrally in understanding morality. Chapter 4 will discuss moral goodness, particularly the issue of intrinsic human value and dignity. Chapter 5 will cover moral rightness, moral obligations specifically.

The most important *epistemic* fact in need of explanation is moral knowledge, the topic of Chapter 6. We will explore whether knowledge, on atheism, is possible, and especially how secularists, be they ethical

naturalists or non-naturalists, contend with the challenge posed by evolutionary moral psychology.

In Chapter 7 we delve into the performative or practical variant of moral apologetics, a rich area of inquiry rooted in such chapters in philosophical history as Sidgwick's reflections on the dualism of the practical reason and the Kantian recognition that morality requires a revolution of the will. It would seem—if they don't embrace nihilism—secular theorists need to reduce the moral demand somehow, hyperbolize human capacities to be moral, or generate a secular substitute for closing the gap between where we are and where morality dictates we are to go.

Chapter 8 deals with another fascinating feature of morality: the need for morality to make full rational sense, for correspondence between happiness and virtue. The challenges for secularists to provide an explanation of how this moral constraint can be satisfied will be the topic of this penultimate chapter. Together, Chapters 7 and 8 encompass Kantian “moral faith.”

In the final summative chapter, Part III of the book, we will argue that classical theism, and Christianity more particularly, can provide the best resources to account for intrinsic human value, binding moral obligations, moral knowledge, radical moral transformation, and the convergence of virtue and happiness.

Owing to space limitations and the vastness of the literature, we obviously can't take on every specific naturalistic formulation, so we will be at pains throughout the book to identify features indigenous to atheistic ethics that demonstrate both their explanatory powers and pitfalls. The argument of Part II will be that the naturalistic and secular accounts of moral phenomena have important insights and can sometimes go a considerable way in explaining morality, but they also come up short in various ways in their attempt to explain what needs to be explained.

4

Moral Value

*Among the mind's transcendental aspirations,
it is the longing for moral goodness
that is probably the most difficult to contain within
the confines of a naturalist metaphysics.¹*

DAVID BENTLEY HART

WHEN DAVID WOOD was a boy, his dog was hit by a bus and killed. Although his mother was fairly distraught, David remained entirely composed, his equanimity unshaken. He had a remarkably stoical reaction to the tragedy. It was just a dog, Wood figured, and now that he's dead, his story is at its end. There was nothing else to say of the matter, as far as he was concerned. A few years later, a friend of his, a childhood playmate, also died suddenly. Again David's reaction was unemotional, except this time, because of the quite different reactions of those around him, he began to think that perhaps there was something not quite right about his emotional response, or lack of it.

Not everyone afflicted with this deficiency in empathy, potentially a sign of psychopathy or sociopathy, turns to violence. Some of them simply hole up in their homes, keep to themselves, and nobody is the wiser. On occasion, though, folks like David turn to violence. And David was one of them, eventually performing some morally egregious deeds, including taking a hammer to his father's head until he thought him dead (he wasn't).

Recently Wood revealed the answer he would have given at that time of his life to someone appalled at such maladaptive and antisocial behavior. Why engage in such cruel mistreatment of others, especially in light of

1. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 251.

intrinsic human value? His answer was that he thought the universe was indifferent to his actions, that everyone simply danced to their DNA, and that the notion of intrinsic human value was a farce. He thought persons were merely machines for propagating DNA, invested with no greater inherent significance than that, and that they inhabited one inconsequential speck in a vast, cold, indifferent universe.²

The subject of the moral good is our concern in this chapter. Keeping with the book's focus on moral truth and human meaning, we thought it best to narrow our focus in this chapter to a specific moral good that is one of urgent practical importance: the question of intrinsic human value, and what various naturalistic ethical theories have to say by way of defending such a notion. Most atheists find Wood's early mentality and disposition anathema, and instinctively distance themselves from him, attributing his wretched behavior not to an atheistic worldview but to a debilitating mental illness. Most atheists are neither sociopaths nor psychopaths and don't attack people with shovels and hammers. Nonetheless, the question remains: What, on naturalism, can best account for intrinsic human value of the type eschewed by Wood (early in his life)?

Natural Signs and Hobbesian Egoism

C. Stephen Evans speaks of “natural signs” as a kind of evidence for God’s existence. Among them are included two moral natural signs, which point not just to God’s existence, but to God’s nature—a God who is essentially good, and who desires a relationship with human persons. A natural sign, on Evans’s view, functions to make people aware of God’s reality, but does not entail God’s existence. The evidence, though real, is resistible and subject to various interpretations. The rich nature of the moral natural signs in particular can help fill in the content, however, thereby delimiting feasible interpretations. The two moral natural signs are the sense of moral obligations—which we will discuss in the next chapter—and a special sense of worth and dignity.³

2. For the rest of Wood’s story, including some reflection on the relevance of psychopathy to moral apologetics, see “On Psychopathy and Moral Apologetics,” <http://moralapologetics.com/on-psychopathy-and-moral-apologetics/> (accessed March 17, 2015).

3. C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 138–139.

Evans agrees with Nicholas Wolterstorff that belief in the value of human beings undergirds the conviction that we possess “natural rights” as humans.⁴ On this view, all humans possess a right to life and other natural rights, prior to any governmental fiats concerning such rights. Historically speaking, there is little doubt that religious perspectives on the human condition and nature of the world were instrumental in the formation of convictions about basic human rights. Some even argue that a conception of human beings as possessing intrinsic worth and dignity that grounds natural human rights is, as Evans puts it, “a product of Judaism and Christianity, both of which claim that human beings are not only creatures of God, but are made in the image of God.”⁵ Wolterstorff claims that even now no plausible alternative to this religious framework is available to offer a grounding for natural human rights. For example, grounding human rights in capacities like the power of reason isn’t workable, since many who have such rights lack such capacities. “Infants, those with Alzheimer’s, and those born with severe mental impairments lack any such rational powers,” Evans writes, “but they surely still have whatever inherent dignity and worth belongs to humans.”⁶

If Wolterstorff and Evans are right, then we should not be too sanguine in assuming that the loss of theistic foundations will have no deleterious effects on sustaining our commitments to human value and basic rights. History is replete with denials of human rights, which makes this question about the foundations of intrinsic human value no mere academic question. Today it is one of the most central and existentially important questions of moral theory. Axiomatic assumptions about inherent human value and dignity constitute, in the minds of many, some of the most important pre-theoretical moral commitments for which any moral theory we consider needs to provide a convincing account. Such commitments and convictions constitute some of the most important fodder for ethical reflection as we seek to harmonize singular judgments—like the value and dignity of human persons—and our systematization of these judgments into general rules. The inviolability of the category of human dignity today,

4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 316–319.

5. Evans, *Natural Signs*, p. 143. Wolterstorff makes a strong case that the historical roots of such a conception lie in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in *Justice*, chapters 2–5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

however, should not be seen in a historical vacuum, nor assumed to be exempt from threat.

Indeed, to be overly optimistic about retaining such categories without sufficient foundation may be indicative of a sort of historical myopia. The way religious convictions historically shaped our understandings of and commitments to basic human rights and the inviolable dignity of men and women is only forgotten to our peril. It should hardly need stressing that, throughout much of the history of the world, categories of intrinsic value and dignity were often seen as far from natural. Nietzsche undoubtedly chalked them up to the historical influence of the Christian tradition most particularly, and did so while lambasting the tradition for heralding and glamorizing weak and slave moralities. It is rather ironic that, nowadays, the Christian tradition is often treated as incidental if not eliminable from the equation, its excision thought to have next to no consequences concerning the protection of such categories. “It is interesting—and troubling—that we are in an age of human rights *par excellence*,” Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote, “and yet there are forces at work in our world that undermine the ontological claims of human dignity that must ground a robust regime of human rights.”⁷

Despite such warnings, the idea that humans possess inherent worth is an idea that many people tenaciously hold to without believing in any transcendent foundation to ground such worth. An important part of the Enlightenment project was to affirm the existence of moral truths—like human dignity or worth—and do so apart from theistic foundations. Although some consider such a project to be either a failure already or destined to fail, there is no shortage of people who are still interested in making it work. Among such secular optimists include the writers of the *Humanist Manifesto II*, which affirms that every human person has inherent worth by endorsing the preciousness and dignity of the individual person. Later the same document endorses the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Kai Nielsen thinks that no special account of persons is required in order to make sense of the requirements of justice. He insists that the religious apologist needs to show, but has not yet shown, that respect-for-persons can be supported only on religious grounds. However, this is not the case,

7. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “*The Abolition of Man*: C. S. Lewis’s Prescience Concerning Things to Come,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, eds. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2008), p. 91.

contra Nielsen, if we conduct the discussion in terms of abduction rather than deduction. The theistic defender of human rights need only argue that respect-for-persons is *best explained* by theism, not *supportable only* on religious grounds. Again, it would be rather unlikely, if this world *were* a theistic one inhabited by creatures made in the image of the eternal God, that absolutely no progress could be made, using the fertile resources of this world, to explain human dignity. The question is whether this world alone can explain it as well as God *and* the world can. Nielsen's own secular proposal is that a Kantian respect may be derivable from Hobbesian egoism, and surely he is right that an enlightened egoist can identify all sorts of reasons to treat people well in order to be treated well himself. But this isn't to account for the moral standing of others; it is simply, at root, a strategy to be treated well oneself, a far cry from providing a sturdy foundation for intrinsic human dignity and value, from *moral standing*.

Nielsen acknowledges there may be no egoist rationale for respecting others in the case of the powerfully placed egoist who need not fear repercussions for treating people poorly. But this is a costly concession indeed. If all that is involved here is just a matter of subscription that is merely conditional and hypothetical rather than categorical, then Nielsen's claim that certain moral beliefs are "bedrock" is misleading, to put it mildly. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that in a later book he suggests that moral realism is a myth. So Nielsen's project assures us we can have ethics without God, but what it delivers falls rather short of what we had been led to expect.

Careful considerations of self-interest are an eminently rational part of the moral life, and a crucial part of the argument of this book; and often, as Joseph Butler argued at length, they prove most efficacious of better moral living and a higher quality of life. To take a modest example, basic kindness toward others tends to lead to reciprocation; on enlightened egoistic principles alone, then, such kindness would be wise practical counsel. Contrast this with political, religious, ideological, or even ethical fervor that treats such kindness as eliminable, or at most of minor importance. It was Pascal who said that evil is never done so zealously as when it is done from religious conviction. The whitewashed walking tombs of Jesus' day, leading ecclesiastical figures of that time and place, went about straining gnats and swallowing camels, much of the point of their ethical and religious orientation having been abandoned—a sobering possibility indeed. A bare but sturdy commitment to egoism would often lead to more humane and empathetic treatment of others, and would do away with much meanness, invective, and animus, too often wrapped with sanctimony.

Kurt Vonnegut, in his novel *Slapstick*, wrote, “I wish that people who are conventionally supposed to love each other would say to each other, when they fight, ‘Please—a little less love, and a little more common decency.’”⁸ It is a poignant and powerful insight, and one that egoism, even taken in isolation, can furnish. Plenty of people would do well to live in ways that genuinely serve their own best interests, expansively and empathetically construed. C. S. Lewis was probably right when he wrote that many of us settle for far too little—crumbs instead of a smorgasbord, disparate cacophonous notes rather than a mellifluous symphony. Again, egoists have something to teach us, but taken in isolation egoism likely fails to cover the whole field. Egoism by itself simply seems ill equipped with its limited resources to ground human dignity and moral standing. What does my acting in my interest have to do with you possessing intrinsic worth? I may see that maximizing your interest may, in particular cases, also maximize my own; I may even come to think that speaking and acting as if you have intrinsic worth is an effective way to maximize my own interests. But such instrumental rationales do not penetrate to the level of inherent worth and objective moral standing; by their nature they simply can’t. Certain moral realities, which cry out for adequate explanation, go beyond the carefully circumscribed orbit of egoism. Intrinsic human dignity and worth is among them.

If egoism does not provide adequate ground for such realities, though, what about that other venerable consequentialist tradition, utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism and Moral Standing

As we consider the theory of utilitarianism, the question is whether it can sustain a commitment to the inherent dignity and value of human beings. On the surface of it, it seems to be a theory concerned with well-being and human flourishing—or at least happiness and pleasure and the avoidance of pain. But for whom? The answer seems to be the aggregate of humanity, the whole collection—or perhaps even sentient creatures, in which case some animals would be included and some humans wouldn’t be, as Peter Singer argues. But let’s suppose for now the relevant community is the whole of humanity. The question then becomes whether individuals within that collection have moral standing, are to be accorded inherent

8. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick* (New York: Dell, 1976), p. 3.

worth and dignity and consequently seen as possessing human rights that should be protected.

Jeremy Bentham, a famous proponent of utilitarianism, infamously said that the notion of natural rights is nonsensical. His target was “natural and imprescriptible rights,” thought to exist “anterior” to the establishment of government. There are no such things as natural rights, on Bentham’s view. “Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense—nonsense on stilts.”⁹ Parsimony, he thought, requires the rejection of rights that are *inherent* and *imprescriptible*. Whatever rights that exist do so because of circumstances of society—what is advantageous to society. This is to say they come about because of the notion of utility. Now, there may be moral grounds for granting civil rights. But whether rights are to be protected or not will be determined by the circumstances of utility, and this is always with a view to the advantage of society. The glaring problem here is that there can’t be “imprescriptible” rights precisely because a concern for social utility may call for their abrogation.

It is rather difficult to think of human dignity or human value as existing within such a paradigm in an intrinsic sense, and it is telling that Bentham denies it vociferously. Bentham’s protégé, John Stuart Mill, doesn’t deeply disagree with Bentham. Chapter 5 of *Utilitarianism* is Mill’s attempt to show that utility and justice embrace, despite the criticisms of the theory’s detractors. Mill identifies duties of justice with the “perfect duties” discussed by philosophers. These (unlike “imperfect duties”) involve the rights of individuals. So notions of justice and individual rights are inextricably tied together. But why ought society protect such rights? Mill says he can give no reason other than general utility. Mill, like Bentham, maintains that the sole basis for acceding rights to individuals is the effect that doing so has upon the advantage to society. So the notion of inherent or natural rights is just as fantastic by Mill’s reckoning as by Bentham’s.

As Mark Linville notes, the worry is that there appears to be no necessary connection between an action’s maximizing utility and its being fair or just.¹⁰ It appears the consistent utilitarian would be in a position

9. Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 2 (Boston: Adamant Media Corp., 2001), p. 500.

10. Mark Linville, “The Moral Argument,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, eds. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009),

of justifying, say, slavery, rape, or torture of innocents. Now, Linville is willing to grant that, perhaps, the Principle of Utility, rightly understood, has none of these “iniquitous consequences.” Nevertheless, he maintains that any and all versions of utilitarianism worthy of the name must fail to account for that portion of common-sense morality that affirms that *individuals have moral standing*. He considers rape as an illustration. Even if, on Mill’s view, it involves the violation of the victim’s rights and the individual is wronged or done an injustice, this is not sufficient for allowing that his view accords moral standing to individuals within the moral community. Why? Because the explanation for the wrongness of rape appeals to the “generally injurious” consequences for the community rather than the fact that the person who is the victim simply ought not to be treated in that manner. Mill, no more than Bentham, offers an account that permits the existence of inherent rights. If there’s a right not to be raped, it’s derivative and contingent on the circumstances of social utility.

While Mill employs language suggestive of direct duties to the holders of rights, this is more appearance than reality. We must not lose sight of the logic of the utilitarian analysis. The principal concern of utilitarianism is to maintain the greatest possible net pleasure or satisfaction. And this net pleasure is not for the sake of any individual persons. Rather, the reverse is true; any regard for the individual is ultimately out of a concern for increasing net utility. Utilitarianism, so this argument goes, fails to accord moral standing to individuals, and thus fails to safeguard human dignity and worth.¹¹

Of course, utilitarians offer a variety of responses to such challenges. One reply is that the traditional utilitarian can distinguish between *standards* and *decision procedures* while insisting that utilitarianism should be construed more along the lines of the former than the latter. We tend to be unreliable calculators of consequences, the argument goes, so in light of such epistemic deficiencies we would likely do much more harm than

pp. 391–448. Linville’s insights were invaluable to the genesis and evolution of this chapter, and Chapter 6 as well.

ii. Among the forces at work undermining the ground of human dignity by eroding the full force of our humanity, whether whole or broken, “normal” or “abnormal,” young or old, writes Bethke Elstain, “Totalizing the population biology or the econometric perspectives are two of the ways we have devised to do this. These approaches—utilitarian at base—have worked their way into medical thought and practice, including the field of ‘medical ethics.’ In such ways she feared fundamental claims to human value as such are weakened and reduced to superstitions. *“Abolition of Man,”* p. 91.

good were we to decide whether to protect certain goods and liberties by calculating the consequences of doing so. It would be better to “regulate our conduct by more or less inflexible rules safeguarding the individual in her title to these goods and liberties. Only in cases of conflicts of rights, or in other suitably unusual circumstances, should agents hold goods and liberties protected by rights accountable to utilitarian calculation.”¹² Such a methodology has some potential perhaps for making decisions about political rights, but it is less clear that it can help us with moral rights. We cannot do justice to the reason human rights are nonnegotiable even with highly inflexible rules that, nevertheless, draw on the resources of utilitarianism alone. Such rules fall short of the categorical force human rights demand.

We need not claim that utilitarians (and of course not all utilitarians are secular) are entirely lacking in explanatory resources, but simply that utilitarianism taken in isolation lacks explanatory power to account for intrinsic human dignity. The claim here is surely not that every moral theory containing any judicious consideration of consequences as part of its overall approach is rendered incapable of providing an account of intrinsic moral dignity, any more than we were suggesting that considerations of self-interest play no role in ethics. To the contrary, both matters are morally relevant indeed. Our basic point, however, remains that any satisfactory account of moral worth and dignity will need more resources than what utilitarianism can provide.

In virtue of being a consequentialist account of morality, utilitarianism inevitably entails a rejection of any in-principle moral right or duty, save that of maximizing utility or something in its vicinity. In many instances this can seem a sound and handy procedure, but at the same time, it is blind to things that should always be kept clearly in sight, as the legion of counterexamples critics have adduced seem to make clear. The consistent utilitarian can't help but perceive the notion that human beings have intrinsic rather than instrumental value as a mistake; in principle no individual's rights or dignity is beyond sacrificing if by doing so utility is maximized.

At most, a rule utilitarian can embrace a rule of thumb that precludes certain actions, despite the fact that that their commission might in

12. David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 269.

specific instances be calculated in advance to maximize utility. But this is a far cry from saying that utilitarianism affirms that their commission is categorically wrong. Function trumps essence, on utilitarianism. Acts grossly unjust and that violate our deepest moral intuitions—like blaming an innocent scapegoat to avoid violent public riots, or a government engaging in systematic deception to keep an uninformed electorate acquiescent—are at most merely consequentially wrong on utilitarianism. This is an irremediable flaw of the theory.

To settle for so minimal an ethical theory remains superficial, by at least in principle sanctioning all manner of horrific evils, and it is a far cry from an affirmation of inherent human dignity, categorical oughtness, or inextirpable human rights. On the theory of utilitarianism itself, even if we can't apply it as a decision procedure ourselves, such atrocious acts may turn out to be the morally right ones after all, ontologically speaking, which simply constitutes, for most of us, an egregious violation of our moral common sense. It isn't that most utilitarians inexorably draw the same radical inferences as Peter Singer, but the troubling point remains that on utilitarian principles there is little to stop them from doing so. This, at any rate, is a sketch of some of our reasons for finding utilitarianism an inadequate foundation for intrinsic human value.

Angus Menoge puts a humorous spin on a serious point when he writes, "When confronted with the fact that a majority may be made happy by the genocide of a minority, utilitarians typically retort that in the real world and over time, most people are made unhappy by such atrocities. Even if true, this would imply that had a tyrant been more effective in brainwashing or slaughtering those who disagreed, genocide would have been right. It is surely absurd to suggest that genocide is only wrong in the actual world because of administrative incompetence!"¹³

Natural Law and Philippa Foot's Aristotelian Categoricals

Having considered consequentialist attempts to ground human dignity and moral standing, let's consider some nonconsequentialist approaches.

13. Angus Menoge, "The Failure of Naturalism as a Foundation for Human Rights," unpublished, accessed online <http://moralapologetics.com/tag/angus-j-l-menoge/> (February 26, 2015).

Philippa Foot's short but influential book *Natural Goodness* is a remarkably good read, laying out an innovative and bold metaethic that attempts to do justice both to objectivist moral commitments and a thoroughgoing naturalistic understanding of reality.¹⁴ She carefully explicates her effort to ground morality and an account of the virtues more specifically in an appeal to how it is that human beings are normatively structured, how we typically behave when it comes to those teleological aspects of our human functioning. She is obviously, then, an example of a naturalist who, contra secular pragmatists or existentialists, considers retaining meaningful talk of teleology a living possibility.

Hers is an effort, to our thinking, that vastly trumps insights of those sociobiologists who make illicit moral inferences based on brute empirical observations. It is different from Larry Arnhart's effort in his *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* to construct an Aristotelian virtue ethic with the resources of evolutionary theory that assumes that it follows from the fact that we naturally desire something that the satisfaction of that desire is good, a principle admitting of major counterexamples.¹⁵

Her book features three distinct parts: her argument against noncognitivism, her defense of naturalistic moral objectivity, and her attempt to answer a few objections, one from the ranks of utilitarians and the other from Nietzschean nihilists. We are going to focus on the middle and her central concern, both structurally and thematically. In the main we will take up Foot's naturalistic, cognitivist account of moral objectivity and moral virtues, first laying out the view in broad outline and short compass, and then subjecting it to critical scrutiny by raising several main criticisms against it.

Foot sets herself to the task of revealing the “logical category” and “conceptual structure” of moral evaluation. One of her departures from the noncognitivists is a move away from their divorce of evaluative language among nonhuman animals and human beings, on the one hand, and between nonmoral and moral behaviors, on the other. She thinks that evaluation across both cases is of a piece, and thus that evaluative

14. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

15. Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998). John Hare critiques this aspect of Arnhart's work, which Hare called the “double identity,” in his *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 65–72.

language—of oughtness, of goodness—should be at least close to univocal. The comparisons, she thinks, trump the contrasts. This may sound a bit strange at first, but here is how it goes. What an animal should do depends on the kind of animal it is. Likewise, what we should do as human beings depends on our being humans; right reasons are to be understood as derived from the facts of human life. She argues that we make judgments of the goodness and defect of living things by reference to a teleological account of the life form of the species to which the thing belongs. The facts of human life ground our judgments of natural goodness and defect—of vice and virtue—in human life.

She derives much of the theoretical framework for her analysis from Anscombe's talk of "Aristotelian necessities" and Michael Thompson's partly overlapping discourse on "Aristotelian categoricals."¹⁶ The central feature of Foot's approach is that it will set the evaluation of human action in the wider contexts not only of the evaluation of other features of human life but also of evaluative judgments of the characteristics and operations of other living things. Judgments of goodness and badness can have, she thinks, a special *grammar* when the subject belongs to a living thing, whether plant, animal, or human being. "Natural" goodness, as Foot defines it—which is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics, and operations—is intrinsic or autonomous goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the "life form" of its species.

Foot wants to suggest that moral defect is a form of natural defect not as different as is generally supposed from defect in sub-rational living things; and her analysis, she thinks, reveals that we find that these evaluations share a basic logical structure and status. She thinks there obtains a logical dependence of teleological descriptions on the nature of the species to which the individual belongs. So-called natural-history sentences, which Thompson calls *Aristotelian categoricals*, speak of the life cycle of individuals of a given species. Foot suggests that Thompson's talk of "natural-history propositions" was perhaps misleading in that it did not

16. G. E. M. Anscombe, "On Promising and Its Justice," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, iii (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 18; "Rules, Rights, and Promises," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, iii, pp. 100–101; and "On the Source of the Authority of the State, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, iii, p. 139. Also see M. Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons*, eds. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

explicitly separate out what she would like to call the teleological from the non-teleological attachment of predicates to a species.

The relevant categoricals, says Foot, play a part in the life of the species; what “plays a part” in this way is that which is causally and teleologically related to it, as putting out roots is related to obtaining nourishment, and attracting insects is related to reproduction in plants. Some but not all general propositions about a species have to do with the teleology of living things of this kind. Those propositions teleologically significant in the requisite sense are connected to *purposive language*. What is crucial to all teleological propositions is the expectation of an answer to the question, “What part does it play in the life cycle of the species?” In other words, what is its function? Or what good does it do? We could say that part of what distinguishes an Aristotelian categorical from a mere statistical proposition about some or most or all the members of a kind of living thing is the fact that it relates to the teleology of the species. This is why Aristotelian categoricals are able to describe *norms* rather than *statistical normalities*.

The main thesis of her book is that propositions about goodness and defect in a human being—even those that have to do with goodness of character and action—are not to be understood in psychological terms. Vice is rather a form of natural defect, virtue a form of natural goodness, rooted in patterns of natural normativity. The same structure of judgment can be found as we move from plants and animals to humans and then from the evaluation of human characteristics and operations in general to the special subject of the goodness of the will. So, at any rate, she thinks and argues; there is no formal change in the meaning of *good* between the word as it appears in “good roots” and as it appears in “good dispositions of the human will.” There is a formal univocation here, a *conceptual structure* of evaluation shared in common by the moral and nonmoral, by humans and animals and even plants.

Why think characteristics of humans can be evaluated in relation to the part they play in human life, according to the schema of natural normativity that we find in the case of plants and animals? Foot says it seems significant that there is this special teleological *form* of explanation, to which the idea of function and purpose is related in each case. If we ask with regard to either a plant or an animal *why* it does a certain thing or has a certain characteristic, we are satisfied with an answer that places this operation in the life of that species, and by *life* she means the development, self-sustenance, and reproduction of the species, those sorts of biological cycles.

For all the diversities of human life, it is possible to give some quite general account of human necessities, that is, of what is generally needed for human good, if only by starting from the negative idea of human deprivation. In this way Foot argues that it is possible that the concept of a good human life plays the same part in determining the goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals. And how could we have these things without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience? Why then should there be any surprise at the suggestion that the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be determined by quite general facts about human beings?

Take the virtue of promise keeping, an example from a previous chapter. In giving a promise one makes use of a special kind of tool invented by humans for the better conduct of their lives, creating an obligation that (although not absolute) contains in its nature a binding prescription that harmlessness in neglecting does not annul. Foot thinks a similar analysis can be used to flesh out the significance of a broad range of virtues. Human good may well be *sui generis*, but a common conceptual structure remains. For there is a natural-history story about how human beings achieve this good, just as there is about how plants and animals achieve theirs. To determine what is goodness and what is defect of character, dispositions, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of a living thing a human being is.

So Foot wants to show that judgments usually considered to be the special subject of moral philosophy really should be seen as belonging to a wider class of evaluations of conduct with which they share a common conceptual structure—including with evaluations that do not seem weighty enough. In Aristotelian fashion, she argues that happiness is best understood in terms of flourishing, and to flourish is to instantiate the life form of that species; and to know whether an individual is or is not as it should be, one must know the life form of the species.

Numerous aspects of Foot's work strike us as fundamentally on the right track. We appreciate her convictions about moral cognitivism and realism, and we resonate with many of her specific moral judgments—not all of them, but many. We also appreciate her effort to make sense of moral realism with the resources of naturalism alone; we would expect nothing less from a committed and intelligent naturalistic ethicist, and this is just the sort of thing that makes for a robust dialogue. Her integrity

in coming to recognize and acknowledge limitations and even mistakes in various of her previous views—such as her misguided effort to cash morality out in terms of hypothetical imperatives alone—is refreshing. Her rejection of moral anti-realism and noncognitivism is almost inspiring. She is methodical and systematic and very bright, and reading her work is a delight. Her effort to forge connections and identify parallels and points of resonance between the moral and nonmoral and between human and nonhuman species is also a bold and fresh approach, one well worth exploring, which she does with ingenuity and skill.

Nonetheless, we retain significant reservations. Perhaps the most significant is that her account seems to leave unanswered a most fundamental question germane to this chapter: Is human flourishing of intrinsic value? We have no doubt but that it is, and that Foot recognized it to be so. She was within her epistemic rights to affirm it, as we think this is a moral truth to which atheists and naturalists are entirely privy, the world structured as it is, human beings made as they are. But questions of justification aside, can Foot's account explain the foundation for such a truth? We do not think so, at least not without some serious augmentation, and we hope to explain why.

We would begin by noting Foot's response to the charge that her account is at bottom utilitarian, a charge she rejects vociferously, writing that what is germane to the argument of her book is to notice that “utilitarianism *never gets off the ground*” in a schema such as hers. “For utilitarianism,” she writes, “like any other form of consequentialism, has as its foundation a proposition linking goodness of action in one way or another to the goodness of *states of affairs*. And there is no room for such a foundational proposition in the theory of natural normativity. . . . In evaluating the hunting skills of a tiger do I start from the proposition that it is a better state of affairs if the tiger survives than if it does not? What about pestilential creatures such as mosquitoes, to which the pattern of natural normativity also applies?”¹⁷

The import of those rhetorical questions of course is her obvious implicit answer: she is no utilitarian. We could sharpen her point and ask about cancer cells, which similarly feature their own natural normativities without such categoricals, however teleologically connected to their survival, implying anything of intrinsic moral value in their survival and

17. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 48–49.

flourishing. Foot is not suggesting that the biologically adaptive patterns of behavior in cancer cells or even tigers either entail or are predicated on objective moral facts about the value of their survival. Rather, in light of the sorts of entities or species that they are, some behaviors simply conduce better to their flourishing than others. True enough. But then we're left with this question: how do we effect Foot's slide from natural normativity to objective morality in the case of human beings? For she is admitting in the case of animals and pestilential creatures that her analysis is neither based on the assumption of, nor logically implies, any intrinsic moral value in their surviving and thriving. Why then is it different for human beings?

We are certainly inclined to agree that there are relevant moral differences between pestilential creatures, animals, and human beings, but the challenge for Foot is to account for such differences with the resources to which she's limited herself, and it is not at all clear that she can; in fact, in light of what she has said, there are reasons to think that she cannot. If moral value does not follow from the teleologically significant natural normativities of pestilential creatures or animals, then why does it do so in the case of human beings? Angus Ritchie recognizes this problem in Foot's analysis, writing that her theory

is trapped on the horns of an insoluble dilemma. On one hand, we can define "good" naturalistically, in which case it is reduced to that which enables the species to replicate and perhaps increase in complexity. If we do this, then what ends up being called "good" is not something we take ourselves to have reason to promote. The alternative horn requires us to define "good" unashamedly to include evaluative judgments—including the excellent insights Foot offers in *Natural Goodness* about the things that give human life depth, subtlety, and beauty. If we adopt this latter alternative, we have gone far beyond anything . . . "Aristotelian categoricals" could justify. To make this choice is to concede that the idea of "flourishing" is itself heavily moralized. There is no longer any sign of a purely biological story of natural normativity from which morality might emerge.¹⁸

18. Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 122.

Allow us to sum up our discussion by raising five concerns about Foot's analysis:

Smart Free Riders: Take the virtue of keeping a promise. She argues that, even in a case where breaking a promise could be done without incurring much if any damage, there is still a moral duty to keep it, at least in most cases, and to cultivate the sort of character of being trustworthy. She seems hard-pressed, though, to offer any reason beyond good states of affairs that result from there being trustworthy folks, which leaves her position well-nigh defenseless against the really smart promise breaker who is able and willing to get over her aversion to breaking promises when doing so is unlikely to detract from optimal species-flourishing.

Deflationary Analysis: There is something historically unfortunate about the characterization of Foot's account as neo-Aristotelian, in light of Aristotle's worldview, which was far from naturalistic. Whereas Aristotle placed great importance on what it means to be human, his wasn't a view content with our being *merely* human; what he had to say about fellowship with the divine and its resultant transformation of us put the lie to that analysis. His emphasis on *nature* was not meant to preclude or trump the *supernatural*, only the *artificial*.

Transition Problem: This point that Foot's intuitions seem to be predicated on an already heavily moralized understanding of Aristotelian categoricals is a good one, leaving rather behind her claim that morality is entirely explicable without remainder with the resources provided by naturalism alone. She rightly apprehends and affirms good and noble human characteristics, but in doing so she departs, it seems, from a naturalistic, biologically grounded account of moral virtues. Moreover, once an account of morality is truly delimited to the resources provided by the general features of our human flourishing, it seems unlikely that she will have enough for the sort of thick account that virtue approaches to ethics tend to have as their distinctive strength.

Normativity Challenge: We think she is quite right, in one sense, to say that morality depends, at least in some significant way, on our natures, on who we are, but this of course invites an analysis of what that nature is, exactly; and just as she encourages an open mind to those listening to her view, we might encourage adherents and proponents of *her* approach to keep an open mind about a more expansive account of what and who we are as human beings. Despite the ubiquity of a naturalistic understanding of the human condition among the contemporary preponderance of the rarefied confines of professional philosophers, treating such

an understanding as sacrosanct seems hardly justified. Talk of a *telos* and human nature in a Godless world is difficult to sustain.

At one point in her book she quotes Thompson as saying that even if the Divine Mind were to bring a certain life-form into being with a view to securing an abundance of pink fur along the sea shore, this would have no effect on the natural-teleological description of that form of life. Maybe so, but Foot's larger implicit inference seems to be that the designs of a Divine Mind are irrelevant to the natural-teleological descriptions of human beings, but how is this consistent with her assignment of primacy to the question of who we essentially are as human beings? If we have been created and fashioned by God in his image, with his intentions in mind, that fact is not irrelevant to who we are; if who we are is so important to the story of morality, it is not an irrelevant consideration. Her efforts to forge connections and parities in reasoning between the moral and nonmoral and between humans and the animals is laudable, as is her quest for maintaining formal univocation in *good* and *ought* locutions to the degree it's possible, but disanalogies, if such exist, potentially matter a great deal. Overlooking them seems to be one of her recurring mistakes; we cannot help but think of Emerson's famous lines about a foolish inconsistency being the hobgoblin of small minds. Foot's mind is not small, but she still seems implicated by a foolish consistency in her categorical demand for formal univocation when it comes to normative locutions.

Epistemic Challenge: Foot's work seems to leave largely unaddressed the contemporary challenge posed by evolutionary moral psychology, traceable to the likes of Gilbert Harman. It is the challenge of asking why we consider as veridical our moral insights and intuitions if we can account for such convictions in light of the evolutionary advantages they confer upon us. We will discuss this issue at some length in an upcoming chapter.

Robust Realism and Intrinsic Human Worth

What is the best explanation of a robust sense of human dignity and value sufficient to undergird ascriptions of basic rights and substantive moral standing? The issue is not whether many atheists in fact believe in such dignity and value, or whether they even have knowledge that humans possess such dignity. They may well offer an account for such realities, an

explanation that is able to do some explanatory work. The question we are undertaking is the question of what the best explanation is.

In a recent written dialogue I (Dave) had with Erik Wielenberg, he characterized my position at one point like this: the best explanation of moral facts entails God's existence. This is not the best way of putting the matter, though; an abductive moral case for God's existence, even if successful, does not *entail* God's existence. At most it provides us some reason to think that God exists. Nor would a successful abductive case for secular ethics entail God's nonexistence. So the current question we are considering is what best explains the objective existence of human dignity and value? It isn't the whole matter in need of discussion, but just one important part. We have seen limitations of two consequentialist moral theories and of one natural law theory, and now we will consider a recent deontological effort. It is actually a family of efforts, advanced in various ways by the likes of David Enoch, Derek Parfit, and Erik Wielenberg. We will focus on Wielenberg's formulation, as encapsulated in his recently published book *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*.¹⁹

Wielenberg rightly notes an interesting dialectic in the relatively recent history of ethics. J. L. Mackie and Gilbert Harman, who do not believe in God, see their arguments as posing serious challenges for moral realism.

19. Erik Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). A word about the contemporary Kantian, Christine Korsgaard, author of *Sources of Normativity*. Her moral theory is an ostensible attempt at constructivism, an interesting approach that sees itself as an alternative to substantive moral realism. A key part of her interpretation of Kantian ethics is to fill in the content of potential maxims with agents' existential commitments, practical identities, based in a sense of who people think they are. Such reflective endorsements can rectify the criticism of Kant's categorical imperative that it is too formal and abstract to give a determinate enough sense of content to the moral law. But since not everyone would choose a sense of practical identity consistent with recognition of the dignity and value of other persons—think of a person whose self-identity is as a member of the Mafioso—Korsgaard claims that “our identity as moral beings—as people who value themselves as human beings—stands behind our more particular practical identities.” See C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 143. But Korsgaard's attempt to do justice to the Kantian principle of respect for others seems to be a tacit recognition of moral realism—that others are in fact worthy of being shown such respect and accorded such dignity. Her effort to provide an alternative to substantive moral realism on this score seems to fail. As Angus Ritchie puts it, “If valuing was not a response to a property in the thing or action chosen, but merely an expression of my identity, morality would also become self-referential, and therefore intolerably narcissistic.” See Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics*, p. 100. Korsgaard is altogether right to affirm that people have intrinsic value grounded simply in the kinds of beings that they are, but this is not constructivism.

Wielenberg himself accepts moral realism, but does not believe that God exists, so he takes up the challenge of defending substantive moral realism as a secular thinker. His central goal in the book is to defend the plausibility of a robust brand of moral realism without appealing to God or any weird cognitive faculties. Here, after identifying some salient features of his overall approach, we will focus specifically on some of what he says that bears on the question of the ontological matter of intrinsic human dignity and worth.

Wielenberg stands in the tradition of G. E. Moore, affirming that moral properties are real but not reducible to natural properties. Near the start of his book, Wielenberg reminds readers of Aristotle's dictum that the good is that at which all things aim, and that in some cases the activity itself is the end. In speaking of an activity that is the end itself, part of what Aristotle had in mind is that some activities are worth doing for their own sake—in other words, that some activities have intrinsic value. Moore, too, devoted much attention to the concept of intrinsic value.

The intrinsic value of something is the value it has, if any, solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties, in contrast with extrinsic value. Wielenberg argues that some activities are intrinsically good, an intuition supportable by such thought experiments as *the isolation test* or *annihilation test*.²⁰ Loving relationships and meaningful work are among viable contenders that pass such tests and are reasonably taken to be intrinsically valuable. Such intrinsically valuable activities are, moreover, connected in various ways with meaningful lives.

Wielenberg thinks that moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties, but he recognizes that supervenience is a vexed notion. In an effort to clarify his own view, he distinguishes three types of supervenience, referring to the underlying subvenient properties as “base properties,” and allowing M to stand for a given moral property. The first way that M might supervene on the base property or properties is by being reducible to the base properties. In this case, then, M supervenes on the base properties because M is identical or entirely constituted by those base

20. The isolation test asks what value we would give something if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments. That would be its intrinsic value. The annihilation test imagines a given entity is annihilated; if its complete annihilation seems to result in the loss of something valuable for its own sake, then the entity possesses intrinsic value. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 3. Wielenberg harkens back here to Moore's isolation case in *Principia*.

properties. Wielenberg calls this type of supervenience *R-supervenience* (“R” for “Reductive”).

A second instantiation of M might be entailed by instantiation of the base properties together with the instantiation of certain non-base but necessarily instantiated properties. This is Robert Adams' famous view of the nature of finite goodness. On his view, the property of being finitely good = the property of faithfully resembling God's nature. Wielenberg calls this *A-supervenience* (“A” for “Adams”).

A third way that M might supervene on the base properties is that M might be dependent on such properties in the sense described by DePaul.²¹ If M depends on some base properties B, then M is not identical with, reducible to, or entirely constituted by B, but the instantiation of B explains the instantiation of M; it is B's instantiation that *makes* M be instantiated. Wielenberg opts for this making relation, as distinct from mere supervenience that potentially identifies categories of mere co-variance. Wielenberg gives an example to illustrate the point. Paley thought that being commanded by God and being felicific (productive of a greater balance of pleasure over pain than any alternative) are both *necessarily coextensive*, but it's only being commanded by God that makes a given action obligatory. God commands all and only those actions that are felicific, but being felicific is not what makes those actions obligatory. Being felicific is an infallible indicator of moral obligation, which is helpful for us in determining what our obligations are. On this view, while moral obligation (locally) supervenes on being felicific and on being commanded by God, only the latter property makes actions morally obligatory. So supervenience and *making* are distinct relations.

Supervenience is a purely logical relation; it is modal co-variation. Just as we can have correlation without causation, two properties can co-vary without one making the other be instantiated. When one property being instantiated *makes* a second property be instantiated, the first instance helps to explain the second, whereas supervenience and entailment both lack this explanatory element. Supervenience explains *that* something is the case, but *making* explains *why* it is so. Wielenberg gives the name *D-supervenience* (“D” for DePaul) to the supervenience of M on the base

21. Michael R. DePaul, “Supervenience and Moral Dependence,” *Philosophical Studies* 51 (1987): 425–439.

properties that is due to the fact that the base properties being instantiated are what “makes” M to be instantiated.

For Wielenberg, the most plausible way of understanding the “in virtue of” relation that he thinks holds between intrinsic properties of things and their intrinsic value is in terms of *making*. To claim intrinsic value is to claim that some of that thing’s intrinsic properties make it valuable and the intrinsic value of a given thing is whatever value it has that is explained by its intrinsic properties. More generally, he thinks that all moral properties (indeed all normative properties) D-supervene on non-normative properties. He thinks many of the relevant non-normative properties will be natural properties, but he’s open to the possibility that there may be other sorts of properties included in the base properties. But any moral properties that exist are epiphenomenal and have no causal impact on the rest of reality.

On his view, normative properties are neither identical with nor constituted by non-normative properties, but instantiations of the former are interwoven with instantiations of the latter. His view has come to be known as *robust normative realism*, according to which there are response-independent, non-natural, irreducibly normative truths, objective ones, that when successful in our normative inquiries we *discover* rather than *create* or *construct*.

Wielenberg argues that, though naturalism and supernaturalism are quite different in some respects, they are both reductive in nature, declaring ethical properties to be properties of some other kind. On his view, moral properties are *sui generis*, but without threatening causal closure. Wielenberg argues his robust normative realism is naturalistic at least to the extent of endorsing causal closure of the physical—even though, like Chalmers concerning qualia, he endorses the existence of nonphysical properties.²²

Wielenberg holds that the natural fact that an act is a piece of deliberate cruelty *makes* that act morally wrong. Wielenberg offers a couple ways of construing the making relation. He tends to favor the second more. The first is a “grounding” relation, which Schaffer calls “the primitive structuring conception of metaphysics,” and which passes every test for being a metaphysical primitive worth positing: it is unanalyzable, it is useful, and

22. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

it is clear what we mean.²³ Schaffer and Rosen attribute such logical features to the grounding relation as irreflexivity, asymmetry, and transitivity.²⁴ Morality, on this view, concerns a *sui generis* domain that in no way reduces to, or consists in, facts that might be formulated in other terms. The worry here, Wielenberg thinks, is that there isn't a well-understood and useful grounding relation that is distinct from other metaphysical relations like identity, constitution, and so on.

So Wielenberg offers a second way of construing the making relation that he suggests holds between moral properties and nonmoral properties: *making as causation*. He acknowledges various worries some might entertain about such a proposal. One concern here is that causation requires the existence of laws of nature connecting causes and effects, and that it is implausible to suppose there are laws of nature connecting nonmoral and moral properties. Also, causal connections are usually thought to be contingent, but what Wielenberg is positing would be necessary. And it is sometimes thought that causes must precede their effects. Wielenberg thinks the key to answering all of these objections is that in construing making as causation, causation must be understood in a particularly robust fashion. The paradigm he uses of the sort of robust causation he has in mind is the causal relation that many theists take to hold between a state of affairs being divinely willed and the obtaining of that state of affairs.

Wielenberg goes on to explain why moral properties supervene on the relevant subvenient properties. Ultimately he argues that explanation must come to an end somewhere. Why does being an instance of torturing someone just for fun entail moral wrongness? Because being an instance of torturing someone just for fun *makes* an act wrong. Eventually we hit bottom; no further explanation is available.

He also takes on an objection from Jackson, who argues there are not *sui generis* ethical properties because, on a view like Wielenberg's, for any ethical predicate there's a purely descriptive claim that is necessarily coextensive with it. Once more Wielenberg thinks the making relation helps,

23. Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 347–383.

24. Gideon Rosen, "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction," in *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, eds. Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 109–135.

since moral properties have a feature natural properties lack: the former are resultant whereas the latter are not. Because Jackson provides no reason to reject the view that moral properties D-supervene on descriptive properties, his argument is inconclusive, Wielenberg argues.²⁵

Another objection comes from McPherson's challenge that brute supervenience counts against a view. According to McPherson, the non-naturalist must take the supervenience of the ethical properties on the base properties to involve a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties, which counts against the view. Wielenberg doesn't think it's a brute relation. It's a making relation. But what of this charge about "discontinuous properties"? Has Wielenberg simply replaced brute supervenience for brute making?

McPherson's criticism of Wielenberg here appeals to this principle ("Principle X"): "Commitment to brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties counts significantly against a view." McPherson writes that this "is a methodological cousin of a metaphysical thesis that is sometimes called 'Hume's dictum': the claim that there are no metaphysically necessary connections between distinct entities. Hume's dictum is a common, if controversial, player in contemporary metaphysical debates. It is usually motivated on directly intuitive grounds." Wielenberg admits to feeling some intuitive force here, but argues that there is also an intuitive case to be made that Principle X is self-undermining and hence implausible. Why does Wielenberg think that Principle X is self-defeating? Because it itself makes a commitment to the existence of a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties.²⁶

Wielenberg shows that both theists and his own view assume there are some substantive, metaphysically necessary brute facts. He thinks there are brute ethical facts. They come from nowhere; nothing external to themselves grounds their existence. They are fundamental features of the universe. So his view can be called normative realism, or Platonism (on a certain construal), or moral non-naturalism. But it is an attempt at sturdy moral realism without theistic foundations.

25. In a similar way Wielenberg answers a related objection from Campbell Brown. Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

26. Tristram McPherson, "Ethical Non-Naturalism and the Metaphysics of Supervenience," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 7, ed. R. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 217.

With that explanation in place, what would Wielenberg say specifically about the narrower issue of the intrinsic value of human beings? In a later chapter in his book, Wielenberg argues that his view provides the better explanation of such value than at least certain theistic explanations. The love between a parent and a child, he says, is good in and of itself. What makes it good, what explains its goodness, he insists, lies entirely within its intrinsic nature. “If there are such intrinsic goods, then it appears that neither Murphy’s nor Adams’s theory can account for them, and this is a strike against both theories. Similarly, Linda Zagzebski’s divine motivation theory implies that ‘the goodness of everything ultimately comes from the goodness of God, so in a sense the goodness of everything in this world is extrinsic.’”²⁷

Wielenberg thus offers an explanandum-centered challenge to Adams’s, Murphy’s, and Zagzebski’s accounts of the goodness of finite things. In a note, he adds, “The same criticism applies to Linville’s theistic ‘moral particularism,’ according to which ‘the value of persons is . . . grounded in the personhood of God’ and hence ‘human personal dignity . . . is derivative.’ Thus, moral particularists must deny that human persons have intrinsic value in the relevant sense, whereas nontheistic robust normative realists can affirm that human persons have intrinsic value.”²⁸ Wielenberg is arguing that his view makes good sense of the intrinsic dignity and worth of human beings, whereas such theistic ethical approaches as those mentioned fail to do so. For now, we will defer most of what we have to say by way of a defense of a theistic understanding of this matter until the final chapter; we mainly wish to subject Wielenberg’s own view to critical scrutiny in the remainder of this chapter.

We wish to begin by complimenting Wielenberg’s effort to construct his moral theory, which he has done with tremendous talent and style. Despite the fact that we remain deeply unconvinced by his efforts, we accord him accolades for his contribution to the discussion. With that said, we have several reservations about his approach, which we would like to register. First, Wielenberg’s affirmation of human dignity and worth—with which we are in entire agreement—is, from his perspective, possible as a function of the way such dignity and worth, moral properties that they are, supervene on the property of *being human* (or perhaps specific features of

27. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 84.

28. *Ibid.*

being human). The supervenience in question is D-supervenience, *making*, understood as robust causation. We rather agree that being human robustly causes intrinsic worth and dignity, but we are left skeptical that this fact provides a secular account of such moral properties. Such a making relation simply, in our view, underdetermines why this causation relation holds. Hastings Rashdall once said that as long as one is content to assume the reality and authority of the moral consciousness, one can ignore metaphysics; but if the reality of morals or validity of ethical truth is questioned, a deeper inquiry into the nature of knowledge and reality is called for.

It is quintessential question-begging to assume that this supervenience story is consistent with secularism because, if humans are created by God in his image, then *being human* would have for one of its essential features a relational property of which God is a part. It is of course an epistemic possibility that Wielenberg is right, but it is also epistemically possible that he is wrong, so this counts for little. On this score Wielenberg seems to tread the verge of the deflationary fallacy.

How can the existence of persons be accounted for on Wielenberg's view? In a world as he envisions it, the emergence of persons is far from an obvious eventuality. "The Astonishing Hypothesis," as Goetz and Taliaferro put it, "is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice may have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons.' This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can be truly called astonishing."²⁹ Wielenberg wants to say, understandably, that human beings are ever so much more: feelers and thinkers and reasoners and lovers; but to simply assume we can be all those things on a secular view of the world and the human condition, despite the vast qualitative leaps involved and what rugged honesty about the implications of such things as causal closure of the physical suggests seems misguided and question-begging.

Wielenberg is a non-naturalist, but since he thinks that human dignity supervenes on human nature, and that causal closure of the physical obtains, it is not clear how his confidence abides. Affirming causal closure relegates Wielenberg's view to an assignment of primacy on material

29. Linville, "The Moral Argument," p. 433.

and efficient causes, leaving little to no room for formal or final ones. For Wielenberg, as for naturalists, explanations must explain the personal by way of the nonpersonal, or the first person in third-person terms. Dennett, consistent in this regard as a proponent of causal closure of the physical, thinks the first person needs to be left out of any final theory. As Mark Linville points out, Susan Blackmore has followed Dennett's advice, concluding there is no substantial or persistent self to be found in experience. Consciousness itself is even hard to find in such recent works with such promising titles as *Consciousness Explained*—Alvin Plantinga has quipped it should have been called “Consciousness Explained Away.” One of the ironies of these robust implications of the embrace of causal closure is that the very practice of science is unintelligible unless persons exist and have observations and thoughts; otherwise everything is, as Dennett puts it, a mere “taking.”

Owen Flanagan has said recently that we must “demythologize persons,” and by this he means that the Cartesian beliefs of the soul and of libertarian free will must be abandoned.³⁰ C. S. Lewis pondered the question of whether [his late wife] continued on as a person, and observed that if she “is not,” “then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. There aren’t, and never were, any people. Death only reveals the vacuity that was already there.”³¹ Dennett speaks of evolution having wired us to assume an “intentional stance,” which amounts to a predisposition to view certain other things in the world as intentional systems—agents with beliefs and desires. But this is of course misleading, on Dennett’s view. Where is room for mental causation in a context of causal closure? Mental events are merely epiphenomenal in such a world, but this arguably eliminates the means of treating persons as ends-in-themselves because the attitude of respect for a person or the moral law itself presupposes the sort of mental causation rendered inexplicable on Wielenberg’s view.

A related point is that the connection Wielenberg posits between moral and natural properties is no garden-variety source of discontinuity. There’s a huge qualitative gap here between natural and non-natural, between fact and value, between value and disvalue. His unwillingness to distinguish between moral and other normative constraints helps conceal some of the

30. Thanks to Linville for this.

31. Thanks again to Linville for this inspiration. See C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 28.

distinctive features of morality in need of explanation. We don't lament his unwillingness to let his moral convictions go, but it is rationally unconvincing and resembles wishful thinking for him simply to insist on such moral realities when he's confined to the meager resources at his disposal.

Not just that, it is wrapped with a sort of historical amnesia or at least denial. Dismissing the historical relevance of theism to the conviction about intrinsic human value—on the basis of the fact that identifying the source of the belief doesn't necessarily explain its truth—misses a huge point. For much of the history of the world, belief in intrinsic human dignity and value was *not* common. There were reasons this conviction gradually grew and replaced the older, “common-sense” views, and among them was the revolutionary teaching that human beings were made by God, in his image, for a reason and purpose. The sanguine treatment of this historical contingency as easily eliminable without seriously jeopardizing such sacred convictions is presumptuous (and reminiscent of Dennett's reflections on just desserts). In light of the horrific evil that men have inflicted on other men in the history of the world, we find little comfort in Wielenberg's brave insistence that he, at any rate, along with his fellow secular normative realists, remains confident in human dignity. We are glad they do, and we suspect they're good men; but we need more than groundless moral tenacity and humanistic hope on such an important matter as this. They seem fond of saying it is irrelevant that historically religion was the source of firm moral convictions about human value and dignity; at the same time, they consider it somehow deeply significant that as atheists they can affirm their convictions about human dignity and value, when in fact their doing so does precious little to show that their worldview has the metaphysical resources to ground such truths.

It is a dubious insistence that says, since explanations have to come to an end, stopping where Wielenberg does is just as good a place as any. It is true that explanations have to come to an end, but the final explanation needs to be adequate to the task. It is not at all clear what explanatory work is done by saying that an act of deliberate cruelty simply makes something wrong. Of course it does, we're inclined to reply, which is part of what is in need of explanation. Several decades ago, C. S. Lewis encountered a conspicuously parallel sort of approach. He wrote, “In the same way, if a man asks what is the point of behaving decently, it is no good replying, ‘in order to benefit society,’ for trying to benefit society, in other words being unselfish (for ‘society’ after all only means ‘other people’), is one of the things decent behavior consists in; all you are really saying is that decent

behavior is decent behavior.”³² Similarly, when Wielenberg says deliberate cruelty makes something wrong, what he is saying may well be true, but it doesn’t advance the discussion or offer illumination by way of explanation. He is simply stating a moral fact, or at least something in the close proximity of one—in need of explanation. Why does deliberate cruelty make something wrong? He stops short of getting to the heart of the matter, in our estimation.

So, in sum, it’s not at all clear that Wielenberg is within his epistemic rights to be sanguine in his affirmation of a human nature or essence on his worldview. Conjoin that concern with these: the distinctive features of morality that produce a significant qualitative chasm between natural and moral facts; the unparsimonious affirmation of non-natural facts instantiated by a world of nonvalue; an unprincipled stopping point of explanation which amounts to more assertion than argument; a historically myopic treatment of the worldview as eliminable that is mainly responsible for the convictions about and grounding for intrinsic human value and dignity. The net effect is that Wielenberg’s moral theory seems to contain dim prospects for undergirding something so fundamental and important as intrinsic human dignity and value.

We suspect it is because of the way theism and Christianity, most particularly, have so seeped into the moral consciousness and conscience of so many people within our society that a moral theory could cavalierly treat profound and axiomatic moral truths as sufficiently obvious to need no ontological foundation and be taken seriously. Human beings are indeed valuable creatures, and we live in a world of thick values and virtues, and we are cognitively and affectively equipped to apprehend such moral truths. Wielenberg’s second chapter features a frontal assault on numerous ideas of William Lane Craig, exploiting Craig’s deductively based inferences about a Godless world. Wielenberg points to many of the same features of the human condition that we identified in an earlier chapter in his effort to project the impression that, even if this is an atheistic world, we as humans are far more than mere animals and savages. But none of that analysis detracts from an abductive moral case of the type we’re building, and, even more importantly, it misses a larger point that Craig is profoundly right to identify. Of course Craig too

32. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), p. 26.

is deeply convinced about something like the value and dignity of human beings; the point is not that we should doubt such truths. Rather, many of us are deeply convinced about them—Craig and Wielenberg both. The question is what provides the better explanation of them. This chapter has showcased what we consider to be the serious deficiencies in a range of secular explanations, their legitimate insights notwithstanding.

5

Moral Obligations

*Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster
of properties and relations that they are most unlikely
to have arisen in the course of events without an
all-powerful god to create them.¹*

J. L. MACKIE

RECENTLY WE ATTENDED the Plantinga-fest at Baylor University. It was a conference in honor of Alvin Plantinga's underground paper on a couple dozen or so arguments for God's existence. What made the conference in a sense ironic is that Plantinga is so well known for arguing that belief in God is properly basic and does not stand in need of discursive evidential arguments. Nevertheless, he thinks there are several good reasons to believe in God's existence, and the conference showcased some of the best minds hard at work taking his suggestions from a twenty-year-old article on the subject and fleshing them out with impressive skill and philosophical rigor. Considered were quite an array of sophisticated philosophical arguments, from teleological arguments to various technical metaphysical arguments and many more besides.

At the end of the conference, though, came one of the most interesting moments of all. After listening to the likes of William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne and Brian Leftow, the conference attendees directed their attention to Alvin Plantinga himself. Trent Dougherty, one of the conference organizers, who teaches philosophy there at Baylor, interviewed Plantinga, asking him a number of questions about his views and various aspects of the conference.

1. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 115.

And then it happened. Dougherty asked Plantinga which argument, among the couple dozen arguments listed in his paper, Plantinga thought was the best one, the most compelling and persuasive. Without hesitation Plantinga answered that he would choose the moral argument—in particular, the moral argument emphasizing the existence of objective moral obligations. For those, he said, who believe such obligations exist, he thinks they provide excellent reasons to think that God exists. Interestingly, William Lane Craig is also on record as saying that the moral argument, though not his personal favorite, is the most effective argument in his debates on college campuses.

We think Plantinga's and Craig's revelations are unsurprising, although in Plantinga's case it marks a significant shift from his treatment of natural theology in *God and Other Minds*, in which the moral argument played no role at all. We have argued for several years now that the moral argument, in various of its manifestations and formulations, has the unique capacity to illuminate the mind while also speaking persuasively to the heart. The last chapter dealt with an important and representative aspect of the axiological matter of moral goodness. This chapter will deal with the question of moral obligations, once more attempting to identify and critically examine several secular efforts to explain their nature and existence.

Moral Obligations and Authority

In the previous chapter, we allowed a coarse-grained set of intuitions to suffice concerning the issue of intrinsic human dignity and worth, but in this chapter we intend to spend sometime spelling out in more careful detail the nature of moral obligations. This is a harder task than many might imagine. Philosophical and vernacular accounts of moral obligations can diverge, and numerous difficult questions can arise along the way. The point of this section is not to settle all the issues involved. Instead, our intent is, by appealing to the logic, language, and phenomenology of morality, to identify central conceptual truths about what moral obligations are. Even still, many might balk at some of our characterizations; trying to be careful in spelling out specific suggestions makes such skepticism in various quarters almost inevitable. Nonetheless, it is important that we attempt to do this in order to be clear about what it is that we are discussing, without presuming to offer in such short compass anything like an exhaustive conceptual account. If people wish then to insist on changing

the terms of the dialogue, the nature of the dialectic, the meaning of key notions, or even if they wish to deny the existence of moral obligations altogether, at least we will be clear on what is being changed or challenged.

Duties are one important set of moral judgments, the broader moral category of which the family of deontic concepts forms just a part. Deontic concepts include issues of moral permissibility, moral obligation, and moral forbiddenness, and often get expressed with such locutions as (morally) “right” and “wrong” used in various ways. An action *wrong not to do* is a *moral obligation*; an action *not wrong to do* is *morally permissible*; an action *wrong to do* is *forbidden*. Although moral duties do not cover the whole moral terrain, they represent, by the lights of many ethicists, an essential part of ethics, and one that cries out for adequate explanation.

It would be an easy task to explain moral obligations if by “obligations” we simply meant *feelings of obligation*, but the latter are neither necessary nor sufficient for the former. I might have an obligation to ϕ without the slightest feeling I should ϕ ; perhaps I have neglected a particular duty for so long that I have ceased to feel it to be one. Conversely, I can have the feeling I should ϕ yet have no obligation to ϕ at all. Consider the punctilious moralist saddled with an overactive superego who feels guilty even for minor infractions of etiquette.

More typically, though, feelings of obligations at least roughly correspond to actual obligations, but the counterexamples are effective in showing that no identity relation obtains. This means that accounting for one’s feelings of moral obligation does not suffice to explain moral obligations themselves, if there really are moral obligations—and accounting for the origin of feelings of obligation underdetermines whether or not there are any actual corresponding obligations. As a result, if moral obligations really exist, the stiff challenges remain to account for their reality and to explain their nature.

One way to articulate the nature of moral obligations is to do so in terms of acts that are forbidden. Moral obligations to refrain from performing actions that are forbidden amount to moral prohibitions. Scott M. James, a secular and evolutionary ethicist, takes this approach by identifying some important conceptual truths about these sorts of moral judgments:

- (1) Moral creatures understand prohibitions. (2) Moral prohibitions do not appear to depend on our desires, nor (3) do they appear to depend on human conventions, like the law. Instead, they appear to be objective, not subjective. (4) Moral judgments are tightly linked

to motivation: sincerely judging that some act is wrong appears to entail at least some desire to *refrain from* performing that act. (5) Moral judgments imply notions of dessert: doing what you know to be morally prohibited implies that punishment would be justified. (6) Moral creatures, such as ourselves, experience a distinctive affective response to our own wrongdoing, and this response often prompts us to make amends for the wrongdoing.²

Moral obligations, therefore, are not mere suggestions, cautionary ideals, means of avoiding trouble, or sage pieces of advice. It may well be that discharging one's moral obligations is an effective way to avoid sanctions, and that censure often or even typically accompanies moral wrongdoing, sanctions that are either internal or external. In practice there may be an airtight connection between wrongdoing and such internal or external sanctions, but even so, a person could still in principle engage in wrongdoing even if he happens somehow to escape unscathed from repercussions of his wrongdoing. A tight connection between happiness and virtue, on the one hand, and between vice and unhappiness on the other, may well be necessary for morality to make full rational sense, in accord with James's fifth point above; but this doesn't entail that actual punishment for wrongdoing is part of the conceptual nature of moral obligations. This is far from our last word on that topic, but we will defer further discussion until later.

Not only are duties not mere suggestions; they are not even merely prescriptions for which there are excellent reasons to fulfill. Ever so many courses of action obtain for which there are eminently good reasons to choose, but not decisive reasons. Moral obligations are not mere options for us, even options supported by good reasons; they are, to use a characterization of Cornell realist David Brink, *inescapable*. Another word for "duty" or "obligation" is "imperative," and Immanuel Kant was well-known for distinguishing between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. *Hypothetical imperatives* depend for their legitimacy on some goal desired by the subject of the prescription; for example, to lose weight you *ought* to eat less. The hypothetical prescription to eat less isn't universally applicable, obviously enough; it hardly applies, for example, to an emaciated victim of anorexia. A *categorical imperative*, though, on a Kantian construal,

2. Scott M. James, *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 56.

is universally applicable, not dependent at all for its legitimacy on any goal desired by the subject of the prescription. To treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means, to use Kant's famous example, is a categorical imperative, something everyone has a duty to do. This in fact is inextricably tied to accordinng people the dignity discussed last chapter.

Philippa Foot, also discussed above, made the case that rules of etiquette fall between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, because they don't cease to apply to someone who happens not to care about etiquette. It is not the case that Foot would lament any and every violation of etiquette; some violations are justified. But in her view, such violations remain violations; the rules remain in place even in cases of legitimate violation. Although Foot was averse to characterizing such imperatives as categorical, she dubbed them non-hypothetical. Similarly, Richard Joyce is willing to characterize the rules of etiquette, given their inescapability in some sense, as categorical after all, but nevertheless recognizes that many people see moral obligations construed as categorical imperatives as requiring more than inescapability. Here is just the point we are driving at. Morality requires an additional vital ingredient which Joyce characterizes as authority; and this, he notes, gives us a normative system enjoying both features (inescapability and authority), one that possesses "practical clout."³

Such practical clout dictates that the obligatory is what we have to do, what we must do—not in the sense of the *causal must*, but of the *moral must*. When C. S. Lewis spoke of the moral demand at the beginning of *Mere Christianity*, he referred to it as a "law" but distinguished it from the laws governing the operation of the physical world in just this sense. We can't opt out from being governed by gravity; we can, however, choose to ignore the moral law—and too often we do.

At any rate, language about moral obligations points to this feature of moral requirement, which leads to another characteristic feature of moral duties. We can see this additional feature most clearly when we consider what Lewis says we often do: act in violation of the moral law. One result is the experience of guilt, as discussed before—guilt understood as a moral condition in need of rectification, and not merely a subjective feeling. Just as the feeling of an obligation is not the same as the obligation itself (though the feeling may well be veridical by reliably pointing to an objective obligation), the feeling of guilt is not the same as actual guilt (though

3. Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 57.

it may reliably make us aware that we are guilty). One can mistakenly feel guilty when he is not, or not feel morally guilty when in fact he is.

We reiterate that these are features of the logic and language of moral obligations. The question of what moral ontology all of these semantic and phenomenological features of morality require and whether such metaphysics actually obtains are conceptually distinct and logically subsequent questions for investigation. Metaphysics can't be read off semantics alone, but moral language and what it implies can provide a clue as to what to look for in reality to best fill the role. Conceptual features of notions of moral obligation introduce but underdetermine answers to the resulting metaphysical questions. Additional argument is required, and this chapter, after laying out enough of the germane and salient conceptual features of obligations, will examine a range of secular efforts to explain obligations and assess to what extent such accounts can accomplish the task.

Moral obligations are inextricably tied to guilt, as well as to the notion that those who shirk their duties in some sense deserve punishment, either social censure or the reproaches of conscience—what James referred to above as the notion of *desert*. Adams identifies two more features responsible for much of the human significance of guilt. One is harm caused by one's (wrong) action, and the other and yet more pervasive feature of guilt is alienation from other people, to some degree or other. Adams thinks these features make a great deal of sense when we reflect on the way we first acquired our concept and sense of guilt, namely, strained relations with a parent. When such a relationship is greatly valued and an action puts a strain on it and thereby threatens it, the wrongness of the action is construed, naturally enough, along the lines of jeopardizing this valued relationship. In very young children, such a dynamic does not involve much if any deep conceptual analysis or ability to articulate what is happening. It begins, admittedly, as a premoral recognition, but Adams maintains that it isn't childish, "but perceptive and correct, to persist in regarding obligations as a species of social requirement, and guilt as consisting largely in alienation from those who have required of us what we did not do."⁴

Should it be the case that in more mature ethical theory this personalist analysis of moral obligations be replaced with a commitment to something

4. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 240.

less messy and more abstract? Adams does not think so, in part because it is unclear how moral obligations in such a case would retain their authority. To love truthfulness is not the same as having to tell the truth; principles make fine ideals, but not binding, authoritative moral obligations. We are, he argues, more likely to feel shame or degradation by violating impersonal principles than to feel moral guilt. John Rawls was one among others who recognized that obeying moral dictates for the sake of morality alone was too thin a concept of moral motivation. This points up the fact that there is a vital connection between an adequate account of moral obligation and moral motivation. Adams likewise thinks so, which he counts as another reason to prefer the thick account of moral obligations found in a rich social context. Owing obligations to other persons with whom we have ongoing and valued relations is less abstract and more motivationally compelling than owing them to an impersonal set of moral rules alone.

Even if moral obligations are best understood in terms of a social requirement paradigm, as Adams argues, not every social bond results in obligations. The social bond must be a morally good one, for example. Moreover, there is more reason to comply with the requests and demands of the knowledgeable, wise, and saintly than the ignorant, perverse, or corrupt. How good the demand is matters too, along with whether or not the issuance of the demand makes things better or worse and is fair or not, and these are also factors that pertain to personal relationships. Adams doesn't think a merely human model of social requirement theory can suffice for a theory of moral obligations, but he is convinced that social requirement theory can begin to do justice to the conceptual features of moral obligations of the sort we have identified, particularly the feature of moral authority.⁵

C. Stephen Evans, similarly, thinks that authority is the most important distinguishing feature of moral obligations. He recognizes that an important task for the moral cognitivist is to explain such authority. The challenge of doing so, along with the epistemic challenges facing the proponent of objectively binding moral obligations, led J. L. Mackie, of course, to reject such obligations as too ontologically odd, leading to his "error theory." What is so special, and potentially strange, about moral obligations? To have a moral obligation is to have a special reason to act; an obligation

5. Sometimes talk of moral obligations can seem cold and impersonal, but on the account under consideration this is not so; they are richly contextualized within a loving relationship between us and our Creator who desires what is best for us.

conveys the notion of an absolute verdict. This distinguishes moral obligations, thus construed, from a picture of morality like we find in Aristotle. When Aristotle used terms like “should” or “ought,” these relate to what is good or bad in the sense in which one can explain what is good and bad for something in terms of what is needed for that thing. Justice, to use Evans’ example, is a virtue needed for human flourishing and being unjust is therefore harmful to a person.

By contrast, in modern moral philosophy, as Anscombe maintained, terms like “should” and “ought” often have a special moral sense, in which they imply some absolute verdict.⁶ Anscombe attributed the difference to the intervening influence of Christianity, with its law conception of ethics. But if such a conception of a lawgiving God is dominant for many centuries and then given up, it is hardly surprising that the concept of *obligation*, of being bound or required as by a law, should remain for sometime even though it has been cut off from its root. This is just what Anscombe thought had happened, resulting in vestiges of moral language retaining the atmosphere of its more traditional use but its soul gone, its clout removed. This is why Anscombe, writing in the 1950s, thought it might be best to leave the modern conceptions behind and go back to Aristotle’s understanding because she thought the theoretical underpinnings of modern morality were irretrievably lost. As Evans notes, Anscombe, a devout Catholic, may have been pleasantly surprised to live to see the more recent resurgence of interest in theistic ethics, including interest in variants of a divine command account of moral obligations.

What is important for present purposes is to note what Evans dubs the “Anscombe intuition”: the idea that moral obligations as experienced have a unique character, and attempts to explain moral obligations must illuminate that special character. Four features stand out to Evans as comprising moral obligations: 1) A judgment about a moral obligation is a kind of verdict on my action; 2) A moral obligation brings reflection to closure; 3) A moral obligation involves accountability or responsibility; and 4) A moral obligation holds for persons simply as persons.

Interestingly enough, Evans wishes to suggest, contra Anscombe, that Socrates seemed to operate with the concept of moral obligation. In his *Apology*, for instance, all four features are present. Evans thinks this is

6. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” reprinted in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. 3: *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 26–42.

significant because the notion of moral obligations as verdict-like and rife with authority may not simply be a function of special revelation, but something more generally accessible. This is potentially important for a reason most relevant to this section's concern: If the features of moral obligation are defined in a question-begging sort of way, then the failure of a moral theory to satisfy the strictures that emerge as conceptual features of moral obligations may not be seen as a significant failure after all. If, for example, moral obligations construed in such a way as to satisfy the Anscombe intuition came about only or primarily as a result of Jewish and Christian teachings, then a secularist could reply, "That's fine; so much the worse for moral obligations understood along those lines." So recognizing that Socrates himself entertained an understanding of moral obligations in such close proximity to the modern conception is an important point, and one that should discourage us from dismissing modern conceptions too quickly.

Joyce recognized this same insight when, after discussing some of the features of Kant's categorical imperative, which he takes to be central to moral systems, he conceded this: "Kant's conception of a categorical imperative is laden with theoretical impedimenta, and represents a philosophical exposition of a concept already heavily elaborated within the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition, so in claiming that categorical imperatives appear in all moral systems I don't mean to import all the Kantian trappings."⁷ Joyce was trying to avoid the appearance of privileging certain modern and Western moral traditions, and this is why he was willing, in his first approximation anyway, to include certain deliverances of etiquette as falling under the general penumbra of categorical imperatives. His perspective is far from theistic, yet he retains, by his own admission, "a lot of sympathy with the Kantian intuition that there is some kind of extra authority in addition to inescapability with which we typically imbue our moral claims."⁸ Despite this, he does not think such efforts succeed in identifying any corresponding reality. Still, though, he thinks that it is part of the conception of moral judgments generally and moral obligations particularly that they possess moral clout, "oomph," the sort of binding authority to which Anscombe's intuition points.

7. Joyce, *Evolution of Morality*, p. 61.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Much more could be said to spell out various features of the logic, semantics, and phenomenology of moral obligations, but enough has been said to proceed to the next phase of our argument. To summarize, then, the most important distinguishing feature of moral obligations, classically construed in the Socratic and theistic traditions, is that they are *authoritative*, offering us compelling reasons to comply with them. Failure to discharge our moral duties typically results in objective guilt, alienation from others, and, where damage is rendered, even greater guilt.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine an array of secular ethical attempts to explain and account for moral obligations, and will try to show how, in one way or another, each attempt falls short in accounting adequately for the distinctive features of moral obligations, their binding authority most of all. The examples we look at are not of course exhaustive of every possibility, but since they are representative of prevailing secular options, if they all fall short, we have reason to think other secular options will also fall short for similar reasons.

Recall as we proceed that a large part of what calls for sturdy explanation comes from moral phenomenology in terms of the logic, grammar, and semantics of morality, on the one hand, as well as the *what-it-is-like* features of moral experience on the other. Together such deliverances provide a picture of objective moral obligations, not an infallible one, of course, but certainly a *prima facie* depiction that deserves our serious consideration. It's the picture of morality informing prevailing ordinary moral language usage, and an important piece of the overall picture that informs the popular imaginative understanding of morality. Such actual obligations, if they obtain, would apply to rational human persons irrespective of whether they correspond with the felt desires or preferences of those persons. Although such deliverances are in principle defeasible, if we take the logic and language of morality seriously, along with those features of moral phenomenology such as the felt *requiredness* or *prohibitedness* of certain actions, it is certainly no epistemic stretch to remain open to objective moral duties. But in that case, the question that looms is what sort of objectivity and moral authority is needed (1) to make substantial revision of our moral language unnecessary, and (2) to warrant rational belief that our feelings of, say, moral obligation sufficiently correspond with actual obligations.

A Functionalist Approach

Let us begin with the primatologist Frans de Waal, author of numerous books including the recent *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates*.⁹ De Waal's preferred understanding of morality is bottom-up. Using a variety of examples, he argues that animal tendencies to prosociality, altruistic behaviors, community concern, and aversions to inequity suggest that the operation of such moral building blocks in primates reveals that morality is not as much of a human innovation as we like to think. As evidence for his contentions, he points to instances of animal empathy, even bird empathy—and the fact that mammals give and want affection and respond to our emotions the way we do to theirs. It is particularly the bonobos who show, especially in contrast with chimpanzees, that our lineage is marked not just by male dominance and xenophobia, but also by a love of harmony and sensitivity to others. He resists the depiction of animals as primarily vicious and self-centered; just like us, he writes, monkeys and apes strive for power, enjoy sex, want security and affection, kill over territory, and value trust and cooperation. We have a psychological makeup, de Waal writes, that remains that of a social primate.

He thinks the weight of morality comes not from *above*, but from *inside* of us. In a Humean spirit he thinks reason to be but the slave of the passions; we start with moral sentiments and intuitions, which is where we find the greatest continuity with other primates. To de Waal's thinking, morality is created in day-to-day interaction, grounded in emotions, which often escape the neat categorizations of which science is fond. Such an approach to ethics comports, he argues, with what we know about how the human mind works, with visceral reactions arriving before rationalizations, and with the way evolution produces behavior. He is hesitant to call apes, even bonobos, moral creatures, but he definitely thinks what we call morality among human beings finds its origin in our evolutionary history. What distinguishes human morality from the prosociality, empathy, and altruism of other primates (traits that stand in contrast with a Hobbesian analysis of nature) is our capacity as humans to reflect about such things, build systems of justification, and generalize morality into a system of abstractions.

9. Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates* (New York: Norton, 2013).

The book, however, leaves a nagging question hanging: Hasn't de Waal deftly, yet subtly, changed the subject? What he is referring to as "morality" does not seem to be any set of moral truths at all, but rather moral beliefs and practices at most. Although he identifies some necessary additions to animal behavior to arrive at "morality," what he adds does not seem to be nearly enough.

Consider moral obligations, which typically are thought to provide distinctive and authoritative reasons to perform an action or refrain from one. A moral obligation, particularly *ultima facie* ones among them, ought to be obeyed; it has authority, punch, clout, prescriptive power. In an effort to account for moral obligations, de Waal employs one of the following strategies: he either (1) eschews their importance, arguing that moral feelings provide better moral reasons to act than do obligations; or (2) does not try to explain moral obligations at all, but merely our feelings or sense of moral obligations. His first strategy goes hand in hand with his effort to hint at the emaciated nature of moral motivation when all that is motivating a person is a sense of moral obligation. He rightly sees, contra Kant, that in some sense it is better to be motivated by higher moral impulses, like love. True enough, and nearly every virtue theorist would agree; but this provides no liberation from the need to explain the existence of moral obligations themselves, including the obligation to cultivate a good character.

His second strategy explains how primates, and especially human beings, experience a feeling or sense of moral obligations. But evolutionary explanations of a feeling of obligation or a tendency to use the language of moral obligation does nothing to provide an explanation of moral obligations themselves. If a sense of obligations and the language of obligations were enough, then moral obligations themselves need not exist at all. De Waal has not provided anything a moral anti-realist or even hardened amoralist cannot already provide, and he has fallaciously conflated *feeling obligated* with *being obligated*.

A thoroughly naturalistic effort to explain why we may well feel obligations or use the language of moral obligation seems eminently possible. Expunged of categorical oughtness, though, does what is left qualify as morality? Have we explained enough? Rather than explaining moral obligations, he has explained them away; he's settled for descriptions rather than prescriptions. Explanatory scope and power demand that all of the salient features of morality be explained, and explained well, by a theory before we dub the explanation a good one or the best. De Waal has simply left anything like categorical moral oughtness out of the picture without so much as an acknowledgment.

Again, if he is content with an instrumental analysis of reasons to perform certain prosocial actions, then why use the language of morality at all? He is hard-pressed to come up with anything more principled than an admission that traditional moral language carries with it more punch and poignancy than prudential language. Meanwhile, he continues to use the thick language of morality and moral obligations while simultaneously emptying the relevant concepts of those distinctive features of morality that imbue moral language with its presumed force and binding authority. His concepts are thin, while his language remains thick and rich. Moral anti-realists can just as effectively speak in terms of behaviors that comport with prevailing preferences or even nearly universal human emotions. What has de Waal added to the case that such moral skeptics are unable to affirm, and thus what reason is there to think that the functionalist account he has provided has given a naturalist any reason to abandon moral anti-realism, be it the amorality and abolitionism of Joel Marks or the moral fictionalism of Richard Joyce?

De Waal seems simultaneously underambitious and overambitious. He is underambitious in his characterization of morality, cashing out prescriptivity in terms of prevailing expectations rather than objective authority, settling for an account of a sense of obligations rather than obligations themselves, and for empathetic behavior rather than empathetic motivations. He is overambitious, at the same time, and for related reasons, in characterizing advanced nonhuman primates as engaging in normative judgments that serve as precursors to morality. While it undoubtedly seems true we can use the language of oughtness for advanced primates in predictive and instrumental senses, the evidence to suggest that they have anything remotely approximating an operative sense of categorical oughtness is a case yet to be made.

Finally, the fact that naturalistic evolution can explain why we have some of the moral concepts we do, and why we have a natural inclination to behave in certain prosocial or empathetic or altruistic ways, does not show that evolution has explained morality. To the contrary, naturalists need to take with great seriousness a challenge like that posed by Sharon Street or Richard Joyce: If evolution can explain why we have the moral concepts we do in a way that makes no reference to their truth, then what reasons do naturalists have to take morality with the sort of seriousness it has traditionally demanded?¹⁰ If reproductive advantage accounted for

10. Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies*, 127 (2006): 109–166.

the selection of those behaviors that issued from moral convictions rather than the truth of those convictions, naturalistic evolution gives us reason to think our moral beliefs lack truth or even justification. Besides, don't they have all they need when they point to certain behaviors that stir in most human beings strong feelings, positive or negative, and then letting nature run its course? Why the additional need to hold so tightly to distinctively moral language that carries bigger implications than they can explain? Why foist the fiction and project the illusion?

De Waal's study neither warrants our use of ordinary moral language about moral obligations in its straightforward sense, nor provides an account that warrants rational belief that our feelings of moral obligation sufficiently correspond with actual obligations. His functionalist and descriptivist account does little to explain the binding prescriptive authority of moral obligations. Everything he writes is interesting, and some of it is important and illuminating, but it provides little by way of the explanation we are specifically seeking here, an explanation that the distinctive features of moral obligations lead us to pursue.

Another Evolutionary Account

De Waal's is, we might say, an evolutionary account, but one that seems by sleight of hand to subtly change the subject, replacing obligations with rules or guidelines, but can evolutionary ethics provide a firmer account of moral obligations, one less reductivist and deflationary? Despite the ubiquity of belief in some sort of evolutionary process, efforts by evolutionary ethicists have fallen on hard times, having been subjected to various scathing criticisms. It got off to a rather inauspicious start with the zealous sociobiologists of the 1970s whose injudiciousness on occasion made them eminently susceptible to critique. Earlier, Thomas Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, was notorious for some of his doubts about evolution's ability to explain morality, while Herbert Spencer was much more confident in evolution representing a moral breakthrough.

More recently, E. O. Wilson, author of *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, pushed the explanatory account of evolution as far as he could.¹¹ Interestingly though, this effort led, especially after Wilson and Michael Ruse joined

ii. E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

forces, to a skeptical stance on morality as viewed from the vantage point of evolution. Because of such considerations as arguments from idiosyncrasy and redundancy, evolution came to be seen by some as antithetical to objective moral truths, including moral obligations. The idiosyncrasy argument, for example, entails that, if humans had different cognitive processes, they could have had quite different ethical beliefs, and so, Wilson and Ruse conclude, no abstract moral principles exist outside the particular nature of individual species. The status of killing others could have been different from what it is. The redundancy argument submits that we would come to believe that some acts are immoral whether or not those acts really were immoral, given the facts of Darwinian evolution, rendering morality redundant. Students critical of evolutionary ethics often indulge the temptation to help themselves to such skeptical claims made by professing evolutionary ethicists and count their job done, but of course such a maneuver is too easy and accomplishes little by way of a substantive critique of evolutionary ethics.

What we propose to do instead in this section of the chapter is take a look at another evolutionary account that tries to make sense of moral obligations from within the perspective and armed with the resources of evolution. We will not choose for our central examination the work of Philip Kitcher, who offers a naturalized virtue ethic, but a word is in order about his view. Kitcher is the author of the recent *Life after Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*. About a decade back Kitcher sketched a summary of his position at the time. He wrote that the main function of normative guidance was to reinforce the psychological capacities that made sociality possible for us. Such psychological capacities involved an ability to empathize with the needs and interests of others, and, to some extent, they were reinforced by directives to take greater account of other people's plans and projects, even where there is, at least initially, no empathetic response. He thinks the primary function of morality is to extend and amplify those primitive altruistic dispositions through which we became social animals in the first place; this, then, has the secondary effect of promoting social cohesion.

On Kitcher's view, elaborated in his 2011 *The Ethical Project*, evolution has put into place certain capacities to empathize with others, feel their pain, identify with their desires, and the like. But since these imaginative faculties remain limited, morality has for its function to extend such empathy. As moral creatures our function is to extend our empathetic responses, widen our altruistic tendencies, and by so doing

to choose an objectively better way of living. One characterization of Kitcher's view is as a pragmatic social contract theory grounded in ethical altruism, which functions in two ways: in seeking altruistic good we are recapitulating the original human ethical problem and thus working to carry forward the fundamental human ethical project, and in seeking such good we are contributing to ethical progress. It can also be seen as a variant of a naturalized virtue ethic. Such an effort replaces Aristotle's talk of nature with something thought more scientifically respectable; on such a conception, what we ought morally to do follows from the traits we ought to develop, which depends on the sorts of creatures that we are. This returns us at least to the proximity of Foot's position discussed in the previous chapter. For now it bears emphasis that Kitcher's view in particular is particularly bad at explaining obligations. For rather than trying to explain such obligations, he denies their existence. He acknowledges that we do not have access to ethical truth or the ethically real, but argues that the ethical community can function as an approximate equivalent to ethical truth by forging what is believed to be progressive ethical principles and choices. This becomes quite clear in his latest book, the ethics chapter of which Alvin Plantinga describes like this:

[Kitcher's] aim in this chapter, then, is to give a naturalistic vindication of values; an account of ethics that fits with secularism but doesn't reduce the ethical life to the expression of subjective attitudes. As he notes (p. 28) it is common to think of moral or ethical standards as independent of human desires and aspirations, having a sort of objectivity that fits well with their being divinely commanded. On Kitcher's account, of course, these standards don't originate in anything like a divine command, and Kitcher's account of ethics and morality doesn't give it that sort of objectivity. What status do ethical standards have, according to him? It's not easy to tell. As far as I could make out, Kitcher believes that ethical rules have simply evolved over the centuries as a means to the reduction of "functional conflict" (p. 53) and the promotion of harmony in a society. It's a good idea for us (as members of a society) to follow these rules, and to coerce the unwilling also to follow them, in order to introduce and maintain functional harmony in our society. On this prudential account, of course, there isn't any such thing as objective moral obligation, and there would be nothing wrong,

morally speaking, in my flouting current ethical precepts (provided I could escape detection).¹²

So let's look elsewhere for a viable evolutionary account of objective moral obligations. An initially promising candidate is offered by Scott M. James, author of *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*. The book makes for a nice read and excellent introduction to the topic, and near the end of the book James tries his hand at offering his own account of a realist evolutionary ethic. He follows J. Prinz's strategy to reconcile moral facts and an evolutionary account of moral development, namely, to adapt response-dependency views in a way that could accommodate both the emotional basis of morality and moral realism. The result is that moral facts are real but mind-dependent; however, unlike Prinz, James thinks this can be done in a way that makes moral facts objective, not relative. His is a straightforward *tracking account*, in the sense that "our practical minds evolved in the way they did because they were tracking the moral facts."¹³

James's proposal has two parts. He argues that we have developed a special sensitivity to how others would view our behavior (from a particular standpoint). The second part is a metaethical story, a story about what moral judgments are and about what makes true moral judgments true. On this view, these two stories can be read to imply that the evolution of our particular moral sense was the result of the recognition of facts about *hypothetical agreement*. "An early human, disposed to judge that others could reasonably object to what she was intent on doing and motivated by that judgment, enhanced reproductive fitness partly because such judgments were sometimes *true*."¹⁴

These are the steps of his argument: First, we evolved a disposition to consider how others would likely react to our behavior. "An early human who cared deeply how others who shared a particular social standpoint might respond to her action enjoyed the benefits of more cooperative exchanges than those early humans who did not."¹⁵ But keeping track of

12. Alvin Plantinga, review of *Life after Faith*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/54977-life-after-faith-the-case-for-secular-humanism/> (accessed February 27, 2015).

13. James, *Evolutionary Ethics*, p. 199.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

the responses of others to one's behavior would be a challenge, to put it mildly, and mistakes quite costly. The solution, then, is to ask this hypothetical question: if your counterpart were only seeking principles that all could agree to live by, would he have any reason to condemn your behavior? As time went on, practical deliberation became increasingly abstract, to the point at which one became concerned with the evaluations of a hypothetical observer. By the time modern humans evolved, they have moral minds that place special weight on how others—from a particular standpoint—would respond to proposed courses of action. James adduces several lines of empirical research in indirect support of such a view.

Second, one of the more unexpected features of both many primate societies and extant hunter-gatherer tribes is a strong tendency toward egalitarianism. Dominant behaviors are often ostracized, and in such a climate individuals would have motive to conform their behavior to standards their conspecifics could accept. Third, James argues that certain studies suggest that the earliest (recognizably) moral communities exemplify the social contract tradition of morality. Finally, if James is right about this, he predicts we will see cross-cultural evidence of this in various norms, and there is a presumption in favor of such evidence. Core social norms appear to be constrained, for example, by considerations of fairness.

So much for genealogy; the second part of James's theory concerns the nature of morality itself. On James's account, an action is wrong just in case others—who have an interest in general rules governing behavior—would tend to object to that action. This account extends the work of T. M. Scanlon, who himself was following in the footsteps of John Rawls. On this view, morality is a construction or a procedure. Right and wrong is whatever survives this procedure. “Evolutionary theory, then, does not undermine moral realism. I contend that evolutionary theory explains why moral realism is likely to be true.”¹⁶

James has offered an interesting position here, one well worth considering. It has the virtue of trying to hold together both scientific deliverances and sturdy moral commitments, and it is not without an array of useful insights that seem likely true. Nevertheless, we remain skeptical about the efficacy of such an account's explanation of objective moral obligations. With Robert Adams, C. Stephen Evans, and others, we harbor grave doubts that what hypothetical observers have to say is morally significant

16. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

in the relevant sense. It is not that we think that, assuming such observers would say something in particular, we would be inclined to disagree with it; but we are rather skeptical that what they say becomes true in virtue of such hypothetical observers saying so. Rather, we think they would say it because it is true, or at least we hope so, rather than vice versa. If the moral judgment in question isn't true prior to the proclamation of the hypothetical observer, the proclamation wouldn't make it true. In this way James's view seems to invert the order of primacy here. The view is susceptible to an intractable *Euthyphro*-like problem.

Another useful reminder to bear in mind when assessing this proposal is that the various pieces of empirical evidence James cites as indirect evidence for his view underdetermine the answer to the most interesting philosophical questions under consideration. Even if, for example, something that externally looks like a social contract could be empirically verified in the earliest recognizable moral communities, the question of what makes something morally right or wrong has not been answered. Perhaps the social contract was based on a shared recognition of objectively true moral principles for reasons unrelated to a social contract. The notion seems confused that there could be empirical evidence somehow to show instead that moral principles were the product of social agreement alone. Treating philosophical questions as thus answerable reveals a mistake about the nature of the questions, a notorious pitfall to avoid in our zeal to emulate scientific epistemologies and relish all things empirical.

For such reasons, some suggest that a constructivist model such as this inevitably fails to qualify as a realist account. James is aware that some might wish to push this point, but he demurs, thinking that it qualifies. Why? Because at least sometimes there is a fact of the matter as to what someone could reasonably object to, someone, that is, interested in finding rules everyone could live by, says James. That some behaviors don't conduce to a society's harmonious functioning is surely right, and this recognition may well be a necessary condition to be satisfied by any realist moral account. The claim that it is sufficient, though, seems unlikely to be true and strains credulity. Even if the position is an example of moral realism, though, it is surely not a very effective account of objective moral obligations.

The theory may well ground a range of ought statements within a society that has tacitly agreed to follow a set of rules, rules that may well conduce to reproductive advantage and social harmony. And this, once more, may well be a necessary part of an account of moral obligations.

But unless we are speaking merely of the sort of Aristotelian ought of which Anscombe spoke, there is no reason to think that an account of moral obligations has been provided in the stronger sense that includes the Anscombe intuition, ascriptions of genuine moral guilt for violations, and binding authority. This shows, too, what would be wrong with trying to adapt this view into another updated version of virtue theory. Even if certain behaviors become habitual within a moral agent, and even if such a character conduces to survival and thriving within a society, what hasn't been provided is an account of a moral obligation in the deeper sense to form and cultivate such a character. That question has yet to be even broached here.

Someone could well reply that he resonates with James's account and is convinced by it, and so much the worse for classical moral obligations. Fair enough. This book is neither able nor attempting to coerce intellect or dictate that one must adopt Anscombe's account of lawlike, binding moral prescriptions, despite their impressive philosophical pedigree, long history, and consistency with the logic, language, and phenomenology of moral judgments. But what it can say is this: there seems to be a price paid for adopting a view like James's account. The price is the failure, at least so far, to convincingly account for authentic moral obligations. If one wishes to settle for a substitute, a watered-down variant lacking in prescriptive force, one is free to do so, but one should realize that this is going on and be forthright about it. What one has most assuredly not done in such a case is provide an account of moral obligations classically construed. One has instead changed the subject. Settling for less might be cast as a victory, but we are rather inclined to see it as an unwitting concession of failure.

Cornell Realists

The Cornell realists—David Brink, Nicholas Sturgeon, Richard Boyd—do something very interesting in their moral theory. Using insights from the direct reference theorists, they seek to identify the nature of moral goodness rather than simply what we mean by using language about it. In this way they leave behind the ordinary language thesis averse to moral theory building and attempt to identify the essential nature of various moral categories. The way moral language is used, on their view, remains important, but mainly to identify what sort of thing it is, if anything, that can satisfy

the role identified by the language. The direct reference theorists had generated this insight regarding something like gold with its atomic number of 79 or water with its particular molecular composition of H_2O . Linguistic competence in using terms like “gold” or “water” doesn’t require knowledge of such underlying physical makeup or substructure, which is why an examination of language alone doesn’t go deeply enough. Nevertheless, careful scrutiny of the language provides a helpful step along the way of discovering what the real essence of such things is. As with water and gold, so with moral value.¹⁷

What the Cornell realists go on to argue is that the essential nature of moral goodness can be found in natural properties. Something like moral goodness is not identical to a simple natural property, most likely, but it is constituted by some complex collection of such properties or other. They are thus ethical naturalists—in the vicinity of secular natural lawyers, although Foot, adduced in the previous chapter, is not usually counted among them. Still, Cornell realists can usefully speak of what constitutes or contributes to human flourishing, what natural sorts of properties conduce to living a satisfying life, and whatnot, as they go about attempting to identify the precise shape of the complex collection of natural properties collectively constitutive of moral goodness. Since some natural properties are more likely to conduce to fulfillment than others, the decision procedure of such realists for gleaning insight into various goods is surely not without merit. But the resources to which they are confined remain natural properties, and it is not at all surprising that this self-imposed delimitation of their available pool of potential explanations will rule only certain goods in. As Marilyn Adams writes, “Secular value theories can offer only packages of immanent goods; some religious theories posit an infinite transcendent goodness and invite relationship to it; while mainstream Christianity believes the infinite good to be personal and locates the happiness of finite persons in loving personal intimacy with the divine persons.”¹⁸ In sharp contrast to Christianity, the Cornell realists confine their theory of moral goodness to this-worldly goods, inextricably bound up in natural properties alone.

17. The pragmatists discussed earlier in the book, incidentally, extended their anti-essentialism even to empirical entities like water—James, for example, insisted that no particular essentialist story is privileged—in obvious diametric opposition to the direct reference theorists.

18. Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 12.

Since at least some elements of a flourishing life can be agreed on irrespective of worldview, C. Stephen Evans writes this concerning such realists: “This means that ethical naturalism has at least some degree of plausibility, and would have this plausibility whether theism is true or not. It seems good for a human person to live a long and healthy life, have meaningful work to do, and these are facts that seem to be evident to anyone. Some value properties then are grounded in observable facts. Richard Boyd, for example, believes that moral properties are natural properties of a particular kind: moral terms refer to ‘homeostatic property-clusters,’ groups of properties that co-occur in nature not simply as a statistical oddity but because they serve some natural function, such as ‘homeostasis’ in understanding the way the human body maintains itself.”¹⁹

Evans is a proponent of a divine command theory, and predicates such a theory on an underlying theory of the good. He thus thinks that a view like Boyd’s is fully compatible with divine command theory. He adds that there may well be problems with the Cornell realist accounts of the good, but he suggests that even if they proved fully successful as an account of the good, they would still leave room for an account of moral obligations as grounded in God’s commands. This is because an ethical naturalist account of moral goodness leaves unanswered the question of what grounds moral obligations. Since an action’s goodness neither entails nor is entailed by an action’s obligatoriness, an account of moral goodness underdetermines the ontological foundations of moral obligations classically construed. Evans even writes, “One might interpret Aristotle’s ethics as providing a kind of ethical naturalism (though very different from Boyd’s), and the fact that Aristotle’s thought was so easily incorporated into a framework of divine law by Aquinas shows that there is no inherent tension between such a view and a [Divine Command Theory].”²⁰

The point here is not to broach theistic ethics prematurely; that plodding elephant will fully enter the room in the final chapter. Instead it is to suggest that the Cornell realists haven’t provided a compelling account of authoritative, prescriptively binding moral obligations, and in fact that their account of goodness would be more likely successful if in fact theism

19. C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 149–150. See Richard Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. G. Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181–228.

20. Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, p. 150.

were true. But the main point here is that they have not provided an effective secular account of moral obligations. Their suggestion that what is good for humans (at least to a significant degree) is an empirical question, open to discovery, seems right to us. Moral truth and human meaning are intimately connected indeed, but any assumption from the start that nothing like the value of spiritual life or intimacy with the divine could play an essential role in moral goodness is to beg the question.

To illustrate what they say about obligations, consider Cornell realist David Brink and his book *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, which offers some reflections about moral obligations that can help us see the way such a realist might defend their existence and reason-giving force.²¹ Examining and critiquing his perspective can help clarify some of the ways his views, by our lights, fall short in explaining moral obligations. Although we ourselves do not agree with everything in the moral theory of Immanuel Kant, Brink's approach will show what we consider to be too big a departure from a Kantian understanding of moral obligations as *categorical*.

Kant's categorical imperatives fell on hard times for various reasons—one being that Kant didn't seem to provide adequate resources to deal with adjudicating between potentially competing or conflicting moral demands. What should we do when confronted with both a moral duty to tell the truth and to save innocent life? On Kant's view that there exists a specifiable maxim at the right level of generality on which to base any particular prospective action, he failed to distinguish between relevantly different scenarios in which a lie, or at least refraining from truth-telling, might be a temptation. Surely some scenarios and their corresponding maxims wouldn't justify a departure from truth-telling, but on other occasions—protecting Jews from German soldiers during the Holocaust—certain maxims might justify it without implicating themselves in any intractable logical or conceptual inconsistencies. Kant's characterization of the prohibition against lying has come to be seen by many as a prohibitive and dogmatic imposition admitting of not even the legitimate exceptions that seem to exist. Many ethicists since have intentionally distanced themselves from any deontological view thought inordinately rigid or absolutist. In a related sort of way, Kant left subsequent ethicists,

21. David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

like Ross, who extended his work, to distinguish more clearly a hierarchy of obligations including both *prima facie* and *ultima facie* duties, further loosening the perceived authority of certain moral obligations, since some if not most among them can be overridden for various reasons.

Another understandable way in which the law-like and authoritative nature of moral obligations came to be seen as compromised arose from recognition of the action-guiding nature of morality. Moral anti-realists took this as evidence to suggest that moral judgments can't merely purport to state facts; otherwise they would be unable to fulfill their practical function. Those who have resisted this assessment typically affirm an internalist thesis about morality, according to which there is an internal or conceptual connection between moral considerations and action or the sources of action. But internalism thus construed is multiply ambiguous, calling for several additional careful distinctions.

For example, one can be an internalist either about *motives* or *reasons*, and even “reasons for action” might refer to *explanatory* reasons or *justifying* ones. Conflating the latter distinction probably contributes to the failure to disambiguate between reasons and causes.²² We can also distinguish between *weak* and *strong internalism*.²³

Armed with such distinctions, Brink responds to the anti-realist challenge predicated on the action-guiding nature of morality by identifying what he considers to be three distinguishable characteristics of internalism. The first is (1) that moral considerations necessarily motivate or provide reason for action. (2) Since the concept of morality that shows that moral considerations necessarily motivate or provide reasons for action,

22. Brink also distinguishes between agent, appraiser, and hybrid internalism. Agent internalism is objective in the sense that it ties motivation or reasons for action to moral obligation, independently of anyone's recognition of these obligations. By contrast, appraiser internalism is subjective in the sense that it ties the appraiser's motivation or reasons for action to the appraiser's beliefs or judgments, independently of whether these beliefs or judgments are correct or justifiable. Hybrid internalism claims it's a conceptual truth about morality that the recognition of a moral obligation motivates or provides the agent with reason for action. And regarding agent, appraiser, and hybrid internalism, there are both reason-theoretic and motive-theoretic variants. *Moral Realism*, pp. 40–41.

23. As Brink puts it, “Weak internalism about motives claims it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations provide *some* motivation, while strong internalism about motives claims it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations provide *sufficient* motive for action. Weak internalism about reasons claims it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations provide *a reason* for action, while strong internalism about reasons claims it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations provide the agent with *conclusive, overriding, or sufficient* reason for action.” *Moral Realism*, p. 41.

this claim about the motivational power or rationality of morality must be a priori. And (3) since it is the concept of morality that determines this fact, the rationality or motivational power of moral considerations can't depend on substantive considerations such as what the content of morality turns out to be, facts about agents, or the content of the correct theory of rationality. Externalism denies any one or more of those three features of internalism.

On internalism it must be inconceivable that someone could recognize a moral fact and remain unmoved or fail to have a reason to act. Let's first make a few distinctions, beginning by dispensing with motivation internalism. It seems altogether possible, and in fact an everyday occurrence, that someone might recognize a moral fact and be unmotivated to act on it. Such a person might be irrational, incorrigible, perverse, or indolent, but such a person is certainly conceivable. The more interesting matter is reason internalism. Is it possible that someone could knowingly be under a moral obligation and have no reason to act on it? We think the answer to this question is no; we are reason internalists at least in this sense. But we resist Brink's insistence that internalism entails that the rationality of morality must be a priori and can't depend on substantive considerations such as what the content of morality turns out to be, facts about agents, or the content of the correct theory of rationality. Brink admits that not all internalists embrace all three of his stipulated conditions; we ourselves are confident about the first, but less confident about the second and third. To the extent that internalism is logically committed to all three conditions, so much the worse for the internalism/externalism distinction, as far as we are concerned. This might be a contemporary debate predicated on a mistaken way to divide the question. The categories here, at any rate, are less important than the details of Brink's position and the way in which it seems subject to criticism.

The authority of moral obligations so understood seems closely connected to a commitment to reason internalism, if we direct attention not just to moral judgments, considerations, or facts *per se*, but to *ultima facie* moral obligations in particular. Surely some moral facts aren't decisive-reason giving, but moral obligations are supposed to be, particularly clear and nonnegotiable ones among them. Brink admits that a moral realist might argue that certain moral facts can themselves be reason giving, but then adds that this is not his preferred strategy and that we should reject internalism. The sorts of reasons he's interested in that some anti-realists use to argue against moral realism are the sorts of pro-attitudes that expressivists

and prescriptivists affirm are constitutive of moral judgments. Although we think such attitudes often exist and are hardly insignificant, we still think the distinctive kind of reasons that moral obligations in particular provide are stronger than that. The sort of reasons obligations give us to act that we think most important are those connected with the *authority* of morality, and this is why our view, unlike Brink's, will eventually make clear that we do think (certain) moral facts themselves provide distinctive, and sometimes overriding, reasons for acting. This, recall, exactly corresponds to the sort of features of obligation that the logic, language, and phenomenology of morality pointed to as important desiderata in need of explanation. To affirm that a moral obligation should bring discussion and deliberation to a halt, that we are guilty if we don't perform it, and that we have overriding reason to do it is to affirm, with respect to such an obligation, a strong reason internalist view. This is indeed our view, but it isn't Brink's.

We agree with Brink's rejection of motivation internalism; amoralists like Plato's Thrasymachus and Hobbes's Fool are perfectly conceivable, contra motivation internalism. But his rejection of reason internalism seems hasty. Since we ourselves find aspects of the second and third conditions for such internalism dubious, we will confine our analysis to what he has to say about the first condition of reason internalism. The first condition, again, says that moral considerations necessarily provide reasons for action. And again, by "moral considerations" we are speaking specifically of nonnegotiable moral duties, perhaps something like a Kantian perfect duty. A paradigmatic example, again, might be adduced from the Holocaust: Adolph Hitler had a perfect duty not to mistreat, kill, and brutalize Jews. This seems well nigh unassailable and a powerful illustration of the sort of relevant moral consideration under discussion. If Hitler was under such an obligation, and surely we think he was, then, on our view, he had overriding reason to refrain from such despicable behavior. That Hitler had made enough bad choices to see the Holocaust as consistent with his desires doesn't detract from his wrongdoing. Can Brink say the same? Yes, but his answer falls short of the full explanation we are seeking.

Thomas Nagel, following Kant, thinks that a moral realist must claim that moral requirements provide any agent to whom they apply with reason for action, independently of the agent's desires. We agree, and thus stand with Nagel closer to the Kantian tradition that would suggest that moral duties apply to agents independently of their particular and variable desires and inclinations and that it is rational for agents to act on

or fulfill these requirements independently of whether such actions fulfill the desires and inclinations that agents happen to have. We certainly think that part of what needs explanation is the existence of authoritative duties that apply even to those indifferent to them and who fail to recognize any connection between fulfilling such duties and the satisfaction of their desires. The notion that moral requirements could have this sort of authoritative and reason-giving power has led some—like J. L. Mackie—to suggest that, on naturalism (but not on theism), moral facts would be ontologically odd.²⁴ Brink seems to think that one of the advantages of his alternative approach will be to avoid such a charge from applying to his understanding of morality and moral requirement.

Incidentally, conjoining this Kantian understanding of the authority of morality with a Humean understanding of reasons for action (a theory that says our reasons for action are always connected with our desires) has led some (like Mackie and Harman) to reject moral realism. Brink resists such a maneuver in a few ways. He rejects the internalism on which their arguments are based, a move we think largely unnecessary, and he defends the idea that we can have reasons for actions that do not derive from our desires, a view with which we agree. The latter is enough to reject the anti-realist arguments of Mackie and Harman, but we resist his rejection of reason internalism, or at least its first condition.

Part of what we think flawed about Brink's characterization and rejection of reason internalism is his inference from the claim put forward by this view that certain moral facts necessarily provide reasons for action. What he infers from this claim is that the necessity in question is a function of a *conceptual truth* about morality. But does this in fact follow? To answer this question we must be clear about the fact that some necessary truths are not narrowly logical ones, but broadly logical or metaphysical ones. It may well be the case that certain moral obligations in fact obtain and carry with them the requisite authority to make them overriding and categorical. It may well be part of the conceptual nature of morality that it includes such moral obligations, but if such actual moral obligations obtain, we can and must speak about more than the sorts of features that something must satisfy in order to qualify as a moral obligation. Such a *de dicto* analysis is consistent with there being no actual obligations.

24. Matt Flannagan, in a yet-to-be-published paper, argues that Joyce's effort to extend Mackie's argument to theism fails.

By contrast, a *de re* analysis says something about the obligations themselves, if they exist, and this requires, or at least allows, that we go beyond mere conceptual analysis, in order to speak about those moral requirements themselves. And doing so doesn't relegate us to the *a priori* resources of our language and concepts. Depending on the right account of moral duties, explicating their nature and source of authority may well warrant an expansion of the discussion to include such matters as what it means to be human, the nature of rationality, and other important truths as well. We see no reason our affirmation of the authority of morality would rule such considerations out; to the contrary, in light of their binding authority, we think broaching such larger topics is the natural thing to do in order to provide a full and adequate account of such authority.

Brink rejects the anti-realism of one like Harman. Consider now Harman's claims about Hitler. Harman implies that Hitler was someone to whom obligations of a certain sort—of fairness, decency, respect for human life—did not apply, because Hitler lacked the relevant attitudes necessary for him to have reasons to be fair, decent, or to respect life. Harman is motivated by the idea that morality gives us reasons to act but that, following Hume, we have reasons to act only when doing so contributes to the satisfaction of one's desires; since refraining from hurting the Jews wouldn't contribute to the satisfaction of Hitler's desires, he had no obligation to refrain from doing so.

Part of Brink's resistance to Harman is by way of rejecting the idea that refraining from hurting and killing the Jews wouldn't satisfy desires Hitler had. For example, Hitler may have wanted to do the right thing but was radically and culpably mistaken about what it was, and Hitler undoubtedly yearned for popularity, both during his lifetime and posthumously. So, unknown to Hitler perhaps, he had desires that would have been better satisfied by not engaging in such horrific behavior. This isn't all that Brink has to say on the matter of Hitler, but it's instructive. What he's suggesting is that there's something flawed in the argument provided by the anti-realists, but what he has to say by way of defending realism at this juncture is very minimal. The reasons he adduces that Hitler has for refraining from engaging in grossly wrong behavior were entirely prudential. And he admits the limited nature of his point by adding that, on this view of rationality, it would not establish that Hitler had *sufficient* or *conclusive* reason not to exterminate Jews. What Hitler would have most reason to do would presumably depend on the number and intensity of

the desires that alternative courses of action available to him would have satisfied.

It isn't the case that Brink is wholeheartedly endorsing such a view here, but what he goes on to say about reason internalism doesn't inspire confidence that his own judgment is significantly different. For he asks the following questions:

Does the practical character of morality require that moral obligations necessarily give rise to reasons for action, or just that they typically do? Won't moral considerations still play an important practical role even if they do not provide every agent on every occasion with reason for action? Isn't it possible for there to be people to whom moral obligations apply who nonetheless sometimes fail to have good reason to comply with these obligations? Certainly, moral requirements can still be considerations to which well informed, reasonable persons could not always be completely indifferent, even if they do not provide everyone with reason for action on every occasion to which they apply.²⁵

Brink had earlier rejected motivation internalism by pointing to the amoralist, and he was right; but now he tries to do the same to reject reason internalism. He asks, why can't someone have correctly identified his moral obligations and still wonder whether these obligations give him good reason for action? "The thought that someone might possibly not have good reason to act on his moral obligations need not force us to withdraw our ascription of obligation," he writes.²⁶ Brink seems to think that the best his moral account can do is affirm a portion of Kant's view: moral obligations apply to agents independently of their contingent and variable desires. But he rejects the other Kantian claim that moral obligations always provide agents with reasons for actions independently of their desires, at least strong enough reasons to render noncompliance irrational. This is how he thinks this question avoids incoherence: "I ought to do x, but do I have reason to do x?" By distinguishing between the "ought" of morality and rationality, he thinks on occasion it makes perfect sense

25. Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 57.

26. Ibid., p. 59.

to say we have a moral obligation to do something but not a good reason to do it.²⁷

Such a view, in our estimation, fails to explain the authoritative, law-like, binding nature of moral obligations. It waters the concept down and leaves unexplained the most interesting feature of moral obligations: their authority. Brink's point goes beyond distinguishing between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* moral obligations; the suggestion instead seems to be that even certain *ultima facie*, genuine, perfect moral obligations can fail to be overriding and authoritative. It would not be irrational in such cases, on his view, to shirk such duties rather than discharge them. But this is tantamount to denying that classical moral obligations, binding and authoritative and prescriptive, exist at all. It provides an ineffective explanation of such moral requirements and their rationality.

Non-natural Normative Realism

Derek Parfit's mammoth two-volume *On What Matters* strikes an imposing figure in the recent tradition of non-natural normative realism. A full treatment of this work will await another occasion; for now our point is a narrow one. He distinguishes between normative and motivating reasons; the facts give us normative reasons when they count in favor of our having some attitude or acting in some way; motivating reasons in contrast are psychological states that actually motivate people to act in certain ways. Parfit connects normative reasons with claims about what we ought to do as follows: "When we have decisive reasons, or most reason, to act in some way, this act is what we should or ought to do in what we can call the *decisive-reason-implying* senses."²⁸ When we have decisive moral reasons to act in a particular way, we are morally obligated to act in a certain way. Wielenberg, discussed last chapter, stands alongside Parfit in this tradition to cash out at least this aspect of moral obligations, and Wielenberg admits his own refusal to provide a criterion by which to distinguish moral obligations from other kinds of obligations.²⁹ This was mentioned and briefly discussed before, but perhaps another word is in order at this juncture to extend our discussion.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

28. Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 37.

29. Erik Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 7.

Why, one might ask, can't the naturalist posit that moral laws are normative in nature just like the laws of logic are? After all, both the laws of logic and morality are prescriptive; the laws of logic prescribe how we ought to think if we want to be reasonable, while moral laws prescribe how we ought to behave if we want to be morally good. The naturalist can claim that just as the law of noncontradiction can exist without having a logical lawgiver, moral laws can exist without the need for a moral lawgiver. Some do indeed argue that moral facts are not significantly different from other normative facts—be they logical, epistemic, or even aesthetic. All of these normative standards do share some things in common. Both logic and morality, for example, are prescriptive—the former for theoretical rationality, the latter for practical rationality.

There are important dissimilarities, though, and Wielenberg's failure to acknowledge some of these significant differences between logical and moral norms strikes us as a mistake. It may well be the case that all genuine norms have their locus in God—reflecting aspects of his nature—his rationality, his beauty, his goodness. J. P. Moreland argues for just such a view in his work. We are quite open to such a perspective because it makes sense that, as Plantinga once put it, necessary truths may well best be thought of as reflections of God: thoughts God thinks owing to who he is, in this and all possible worlds. Nevertheless, despite whatever all the various norms may hold in common, moral ones seem distinct in an important sense. Both logical (and epistemic) and moral norms may all be authoritative, prescriptive, and unavoidable; but moral norms are, additionally, the sort of standards whose violation should make us feel guilty. We don't think of such guilt merely or primarily as a feeling (another way our view differs from Wielenberg's). We see it as an objective moral condition. It's not that the violation of every moral norm results in guilt; not every moral norm is a duty; some are values. But the neglect of some values, anyway, violates a moral duty, and in such cases we are guilty.

“Oughtness” may apply to all of these variants of normativity; this flexibility shows an important way oughtness locutions can be variously construed. It is only the moral ought, though, whose violation properly generates guilt. We often use ought language to point to prescriptions that don't attain to the level of obligations—as in etiquette. In the case of logic, the normative standards do give us reasons to make certain inferences and refrain from others. And sensitivity to such reasons is good—expansively construed. Robert Adams says sensitivity to good reasons is a form of excellence, and we agree. But the violation of constructive dilemma or

modus tollens doesn't, or shouldn't, generate guilt, a need to be forgiven, or alienation from others that forgiveness can fix—distinctive features of shirking moral obligations.³⁰

We think Erik Wielenberg, Derek Parfit, Colin McGinn, David Enoch, and others put the cart before the horse. It is true that norms are connected with reasons to act, but the case of morality involves obligations that carry features these other normative standards do not. It isn't the case that we find particular sorts of reasons to act and then presume we have explained moral obligations; this is backwards, and an impeccable way to circumvent the authority—arguably the most distinguishing salient feature of all—of moral obligations. Rather, moral obligations themselves give us compelling reasons to act. Inverting this picture has been one of the ways a number of secularists have, wittingly or not, watered moral obligations down, neglected one of their most important distinguishing features, and mistakenly acted as though moral obligations somehow are reducible to a preponderance of reasons to act. Acting and thinking rationally does not constitute a full explanation of moral belief and practice. Moral obligation carries extra clout and punch, which needs accounting for.

Guilt, it is thought, properly attaches to morality in a way it doesn't to breaking the laws of logic. We don't feel guilty, and shouldn't, for making a logical mistake. Maybe we feel silly or even embarrassed, but not guilty. The feeling of guilt, though it can be absent on occasions when we're still actually guilty and present on occasions we're not (which is enough to show these things aren't identical), more typically points to a real state of guilt.

Certain secular philosophers want to assimilate moral obligations to having good reasons to act in a certain way, but they thereby lose the distinctive character of moral obligations. What they do is provide a number of reasons to perform an action (like help one in need) and act as though they have thus explained where a moral obligation comes from. We instead think it often works the other way: we see that we have an obligation, which then gives us reasons to act. We suspect their approach is a way to domesticate obligations and make them more explicable on the

30. We do not mean to rule out the possibility of cognitive sin. Some intellectual mistakes can indeed be deeply culpable, but in order for the culpability to be moral culpability, the mistake, we think, needs to be more than a case of irrationality alone. There needs to be a moral mistake in the mix as well.

terms of their worldview, but in the process they are not accounting for some of the distinctive features of moral obligations.

To say, "I have a duty to help this person in need," is indeed to say I have an overriding reason to do so. How such overriding obligations (that we are guilty for neglecting) obtain on naturalism is the challenge for our secular interlocutors. We think that they can explain some aspects of them, but that theism provides the better and fuller explanation. We don't look at the poor person and count up a distinct set of normative reasons to act and then infer we have an obligation as a result. Rather, we experience the obligation—which includes overriding and authoritative reasons to act—and then choose either to discharge the duty or not. It is analogous to our seeing a chair and finding ourselves convinced there's a chair there, rather than inferring to its existence on the basis of having reliable sensory apparatus and a particular sense impression.

In conclusion, we find it encouraging that twenty years ago Robert Adams anticipated an approach like the one we've been discussing:

Suppose the preponderance of moral reasons favors your not walking on the lawn, but also favors your not worrying very much about it and not feeling guilty if you do it—perhaps because it would be better, on balance, for all concerned if we do not worry much about such things. Suppose, in other words, that it would be (mildly) irrational for moral reasons for you not to walk on the grass, but also irrational for moral reasons for you to feel guilty about doing so. Suppose it would also be morally irrational for you to try to make people feel that they *must* not walk on the grass. In that case, I submit, we should conclude that walking on the lawn does not violate an obligation and is not morally wrong, though it is (mildly) irrational on moral grounds. The concept of moral obligation is not there just to tell us about balances of moral reasons, but rather to express something more urgent—though of course I grant that the word 'ought' can be used just to assert a preponderance of reasons (and not necessarily moral reasons).³¹

Obviously, more could be said, and we have said more in other places, but the challenge to secular ethics to account for objective, prescriptively

31. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 238.

binding, authoritative moral obligations remains a formidable one. In our summative chapter we will argue that the conjunction of God and the world will make for the better explanation than what naturalism (or anything in its close proximity) can accomplish. The world is not enough.

If we were wont to engage in a bit of hyperbolic rhetorical flourish, we might bring the chapter to a dramatic end by saying that naturalists who, despite the writing on the wall, assiduously strive to salvage their dysfunctional relationship with objective morality are in an abusive relationship. They replace obligations with rules, objective guilt with subjective guilt, intrinsic goods with instrumental ones; moral goals bereft of sufficient teleology are foisted on hapless and unsuspecting listeners. In the process their ostensible beloved (morality) gets toppled from her throne, stripped of her riches, and in reductive fashion domesticated to perform lowly chores alone—like helping us merely “get along.” Cruelly clipped are the wings of her higher and most ennobling of reaches. The result is a watered-down, emaciated, deflationary account of morality, a shell of her former glorious self, emptied and divested of her most enchanting and winsome distinctives and charms. We would respectfully suggest perhaps it’s time morality refuse to settle, declare it’s time to see other people, and say to naturalism, her ignoble suitor, “It’s not me. It’s you.”

But we’re not thus wont, so we won’t.

6

Moral Knowledge

Any argument for moral skepticism will be based upon premises which are less obvious than the existence of objective moral values themselves.

LOUISE ANTONY

WHEN I (DAVE) WAS a boy, I saw a television commercial in which an impoverished child was handed food by a relief worker. I still remember the poignancy of the moment for me, how sure I was at the time, and still am, that what I had just witnessed was something good and beautiful. The insight seemed to burn with the deepest ingestion into my psyche. As young as I was, I even recall thinking that I was more sure of the moral rightness of what I had just witnessed than of just about anything else. This sort of moral experience, especially at a formative age, can lend itself to an incorrigible conviction. One can be so sure of the truth of a proposition that practically no amount of evidence can seem adequate to call it into question. What else could approach such near certainty?

As I got older, though, and studied philosophy, I encountered challenges even to moral convictions as sturdy as that memorable recollection from childhood. Nihilists deny objective moral facts, for example; E. O. Wilson and Michael Ruse have suggested that ethics is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes. Even if there are objective moral facts—the metaphysical issue that occupied our last two chapters—the question of moral epistemology is different. David Hume seemed to subscribe to the notion that belief in objective moral properties is at best unwarranted. Certain facts or states of affairs surely obtain without our knowledge of them. So when it comes to moral knowledge, how do we account for it? What sorts of challenges do moral knowledge claims encounter? How, in particular, do secular moral realists who claim to know various moral truths explain their ability to do so, especially in light of various challenges

they face? These are the questions that will receive our attention in this chapter.

A Set of Scenarios

Suppose on some bright, sunny afternoon you take a stroll through the town square where a huge clock tower looms on prominent display. You look up at the ornate structure and see clearly that it reads 2 o'clock. That sounds about right, and you form the belief that it's 2 o'clock. But do you know that it's 2 o'clock? It depends, and not for a lack of "certainty." Few of our beliefs qualify as objectively certain; the pragmatists were right about that. Such a Cartesian test for knowledge proves too prohibitive, and such a standard is inappropriate. We need not preclude manipulative demons and Matrix worlds before making legitimate knowledge claims. Knowledge doesn't require Cartesian certainty, nor does knowing require knowing that we know, or knowing that we know that we know—a prodigious epistemic achievement indeed. So let's lay Cartesian certainty and its pushy relatives aside and ask again, do you have propositional knowledge that it is 2 o'clock? Again, it depends.

For example, suppose the clock is actually inaccurate, reading 7:15, when you know full well it is early afternoon. The discrepancy is obvious, allowing you to know the clock is wrong. Obviously enough, you do not know it is 7:15 unless it is actually 7:15. We can know *that* propositions are false, but we can't *know* false propositions. We can know that twice two is five is false, but we cannot know that twice two is five. So there is no knowledge that it is 2 o'clock in this "wrong clock" scenario. There is some knowledge, though: that it is not 7:15.

Suppose, even worse, that the clock, in fact, was never made to give accurate times, but instead its hands are guided by a random set of electronic signals sent from halfway across the country. The clock, as a result, gives the times it does because of causes completely disconnected from the actual time. Call this the "random time" scenario. This will make it very difficult if not impossible to acquire knowledge of the right time from the clock.

Suppose now that the clock is accurate when you look at it. It says 2 o'clock. You look at the clock, form the belief it is 2 o'clock, and it actually is 2 o'clock. Do you know that it is? Perhaps, but not necessarily, because the clock may be broken. Imagine that 24 hours before, to the minute, the

clock, unknown to you, stopped running. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, as they say. You happen to look up right at 2 o'clock, the very time the clock had stopped the day before. Call this the "coincidence scenario."

Now, in assessing the coincidence scenario, a further question arises: are you justified in believing that it's 2 o'clock? Here we can distinguish between what we might call *objective* justification and *subjective* justification. Objectively speaking, there is lack of justification because, as it happens, you are relying on a defective clock. The clock doesn't provide compelling objective reasons to believe it's 2 o'clock, but since you have no reason to suspect the clock is broken, you consider yourself to have good reason to think it's 2 o'clock, and you're within your epistemic rights in doing so. So you have subjective justification, but you lack objective justification.

Opinions differ on what this implies. Some might suggest that requiring objective justification is necessary for knowledge; others might suggest that subjective justification in a case like this is enough to qualify as justification *per se*. We are not taking a position on that matter; we simply wish to identify both possibilities. Assigning primacy to objective justification in this case would lead to the suggestion that you don't have knowledge because of a lack of justification, objectively construed. Let's call this the "Objective justification failure" scenario. Assigning primacy to subjective justification in this case might lead to the suggestion that you had justified true belief in this case, despite your lack of knowledge. This would render the case a "Gettier-like" counterexample to the equation of justified true belief, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other. So let's call this interpretation of the event a "Gettier clock" case. In fact, exactly this Gettier-like example was offered by Bertrand Russell (before Gettier's famous counterexamples).

Suppose now instead that the clock is both accurate and fully functional. You see that the clock says 2 o'clock, it is in fact 2 o'clock, you form the belief that it is 2 o'clock, and you do so based on what the clock says and the fact that the clock is likely functional. On the assumption that knowledge is something much like properly justified true belief, you could be said to know that it is 2 o'clock. Call this the "discursive knowledge case."

Now imagine one last scenario. Suppose you look at the clock and see the time. As it happens, the clock is functional and accurate, but you don't infer the time from consideration of such factors. Rather, having glanced at the clock, you simply find yourself believing it's 2 o'clock. Let's call this

the “nondiscursive knowledge” scenario. An even more obvious nondiscursive knowledge case would be intuitively knowing the accurate time without even looking at the clock, but in this case such a scenario seems farfetched and epistemically indulgent.

Now let’s put the major options here into a 2×2 grid, depending on whether or not you have knowledge, and whether or not you have justification. There is some unavoidable overlap, but this way of identifying the array of options can prove a helpful heuristic despite its flaws.

		Knowledge	No Knowledge
		1: Discursive knowledge	3: Gettier Clock
Justification	Knowledge	2: Nondiscursive knowledge	4: Lack of discursive knowledge (owing to lack of justification or warrant);
	No Justification		5: Random Time

Knowledge, we are assuming, arises when there is something like properly justified true belief (upper left) and certain appropriate nondiscursive cases (lower left). The discursive knowledge case (1) is an example of inferential knowledge, and the nondiscursive case (2) an example of something more intuitive or perhaps even properly basic.

Knowledge fails to obtain in scenarios (3) through (5). In the Gettier case (3), there is justified true belief but still not knowledge because the clock is malfunctioning. In cases (4) and (5) there is no justification and no knowledge. When there is lack of discursive knowledge (4), the clock is accurate but broken, and there is lack of objective justification. (This is similar to the Gettier case except justification here is construed in more externalist terms.) In the random time case (5), the clock is likely inaccurate but, more importantly, systematically made to give a time because of causes unconnected with the actual time, so you have no reason to think the indicated time is accurate.

Now consider the moral analogues of these cases. Case (1) would involve standard discursive moral knowledge construed as properly justified true beliefs (or something in their close vicinity). Our moral clock is working just fine, and such knowledge is the result of an inferential process. Case (2) would be moral knowledge gained via intuitive or nondiscursive

means, including properly basic moral beliefs. We reliably know what's moral without making an inference; we simply find ourselves holding certain moral convictions. At least some such convictions are likely to qualify as knowledge. Those are the two main types of moral knowledge.

Cases in which moral knowledge is lacking would be cases where there either is justification for the beliefs in question, or there is not. In case (3), where there is justification (as well as true beliefs) but not knowledge, we have a Gettier moral case. The moral clock is accurate, and we have reason to assume it's functioning properly, even though, as it happens, it is not. In (4), even assuming the moral belief in question is true or likely true, the moral beliefs still lack objective justification, construed in something like reliabilist terms, so no moral knowledge results. The moral clock is objectively broken in such a scenario. In (5), the situation is even worse, as our clock (moral belief-forming mechanism) is systematically misleading, so neither objective moral justification nor moral knowledge results.

We intend to discuss each of these five moral scenarios and, in doing so, examine a number of ways in which secular ethical views have been critiqued and defended against such criticisms. At the end of the chapter we will introduce another challenge for secular ethical theories to overcome, even if moral knowledge is consistent with naturalism, and we will summarize our findings.

Discursive Moral Knowledge

The possibility and plausibility of straightforward moral knowledge for human beings, secular or religious, seems, in many ways, a natural default position to assume. Moral language, conversation, and deliberation all usually seem to presuppose a cognitivist understanding of moral facts and at least a measure of moral knowledge. And it's natural to assume that at least some of these beliefs involve conscious inference on the basis of various kinds of evidence.

Readers might be inclined to expect that in a book like this, which is arguing on moral grounds for the existence of God, we would be inclined to reject the claim that naturalists can have moral knowledge of any sort. Doesn't naturalism rule out moral knowledge? This is indeed a question we will explore in this chapter, but even if it does, this does not mean that naturalists lack moral knowledge. Naturalists lack moral knowledge if naturalism precludes moral knowledge *and* naturalism is true; but of course in that case, nobody would have moral knowledge, neither believer nor unbeliever.

Of course, we do not think that naturalism is true, for a number of reasons, moral ones among them. Moreover, our epistemic moral argument does not depend on naturalism failing to provide an account of moral knowledge. It only requires that the explanations of moral knowledge that naturalists or secularists provide are not as good as what robust theism can provide.¹

More importantly, though, a moral argument for God's existence actually requires that naturalists entertain a fair bit of confidence in at least some of their moral beliefs. An argument's premises can't be less likely than its conclusion if it hopes to be effective at persuasion. A situation in which naturalists are more sure of moral truth than of God's existence is no detriment to the moral argument; quite to the contrary, it is actually just what the moral argument needs in order to be found even possibly effective by such individuals. A naturalist possessing moral knowledge in no way provides a defeater for a moral argument for God's existence.

To wade into this issue of discursive moral knowledge, then, let us begin with the question of justification, and a plausible account of how human beings, irrespective of their worldview, can have justification, adequate evidence, for their moral beliefs.

To pick up a discussion with which we concluded the previous chapter, consider again the conspicuous parallel or parity between theoretical and practical reasoning. The former is usually thought to enable insight into the way the world is; the latter is the sort of reasoning involved in figuring out how it is we ought to live. For discussion purposes and ease of reference, we will refer to these simply as "logic" and "morality," respectively. (We could have said "rationality" instead of logic, but nothing rides on our choice for present purposes.) Now let's identify four salient ways one might go about discussing their relative merits, particularly their validity, focusing our attention on three ways of construing such merits. Again, assuming naturalism and constructing a 2x2 diagram, we get this:

	Morality Valid	Morality Invalid
Logic Reliable	Parfit, Wielenberg, Enoch, Brink, etc.	Mackie, Joyce, etc.
Logic Unreliable	X	Plantinga, (C. S.) Lewis, etc.

1. Even more minimally we only need to argue that theism provides the overall best explanation of morality and its features, epistemic ones just one set among them.

As the chart shows, once a parity is postulated between theoretical and practical reasoning, a choice presents itself. We can, roughly, retain confidence in both, neither, or one or the other. Of course, there are nuances to these various positions, but for now this rough assortment of possibilities suffices. Some, like C. S. Lewis in his famous debate with Elizabeth Anscombe, and like Alvin Plantinga and Victor Reppert more recently, push the parity and suggest that both morality and logic lose their validity in a purely naturalistic world. Of course, these individuals also reject naturalism and its implications, but their view is that, on naturalism, both logic and morality are in serious jeopardy. They think that naturalism constitutes an undercutting, perhaps even rebutting defeater for both reason and ethics.

Others, such as J. L. Mackie and Richard Joyce, E. O. Wilson and Michael Ruse, argue that theoretical reasoning retains its power and validity on naturalism, but that normative moral categories are lost; either an error theory obtains, or at most a fictionalist account of morality remains possible. This is a position closer to the view that naturalism poses a rebutting defeater of morality (although Joyce's concession below shows some of the nuances among such thinkers). Such theorists tend to reject the parity between logic and morality, thinking the latter possesses distinctive features—its action-guiding nature, prescriptive force, authority—difficult to square with a naturalistic perspective. Joyce thinks moral realism remains a possibility, but that moral knowledge is exceedingly unlikely even in that contingency.

More will be said about such challenges to moral knowledge, but for now we wish to examine the views of those who think that naturalism warrants continuing confidence in both logic (reason) and morality. Regarding morality, these theorists think both that moral realism obtains, and that knowledge of morality obtains as well. Confidence in this sort of realist view of both logic and morality might derive from what morality and logic share in common, namely, both of them provide evaluative and normative constraints or reasons. And if reason and logic are thought to be reliable, these moral realists suggest that morality should be thought of as reliable too, despite some of its features that may be *sui generis* or at least different from theoretical or scientific reasoning. Their similarities trump their differences.

To take one paradigmatic sort of analysis, consider the following response to a Mackie-like argument against moral objectivism, namely, that Mackie's argument stands against both moral objectivism because of its presumed ontological queerness and moral knowledge because of its

presumed reliance on certain intuitions. Such a defense against Mackie's claim derives from the fact that we are committed to the existence of other norms of reasoning with the same ontological and epistemological properties as moral ones. "If there are objective, non-analytic norms in other areas of judgement (*sic*), this will remove a major motivation for denying there are objective moral norms," Angus Ritchie writes.² For we would have shown that there are indeed true statements which share the following pairs of features:

- 1) They are both descriptive of entities and are also prescriptive to those rational agents who come to know their truth, and
- 2) They are neither analytic nor knowable by empirical research alone.

To find an example, Ritchie confines his search to the physical sciences, and identifies norms of theory choice. Some might call these epistemic norms, which can be thought of either as falling into our category of logic or rationality broadly construed, or as a sort of binding norm conceptually distinct from those. Either way, what is important is the satisfaction of the two conditions stipulated above. And Ritchie specifically selects, appropriately enough (as this whole book is an elaborate abductive argument), inference to the best explanation (IBE). Physicists routinely make such inferences when they see, say, vapor trails in cloud chambers. "The principles," Ritchie notes, "for determining what counts as a good explanation can be denied without self-contradiction, and there is nothing 'beneath' these principles which we can use to offer a non-circular justification."³ Such a principle can't help but be used in forming theories about the physical world, and the principle in question is one thought to be both normative and descriptive, for it tells us what we ought to accept on the basis of the evidence.

Ritchie thus infers from IBE that we are committed to the existence of synthetic a priori imperatives that tell us which conclusions we ought to draw from the evidence generated by empirical observation and experimentation. What warrants our confidence in the deliverances of our various explanations? Here a variety of answers is possible, but one important

2. Angus Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 13.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

recent answer comes from David Enoch, who argues that human beings can't help but engage in explanatory projects. We cannot stop explaining altogether; we can't stop trying to make at least some sense of what is going on around us. So, because the practice of explanation is indispensable, and principles of IBE are indispensable to that practice, we have to take their deliverances seriously. Warrant comes from the practical indispensability of such inferences.

Conjoin this now with the practice of reflective equilibrium, made most famous by John Rawls. Ritchie argues that our knowledge of synthetic *a priori* truths (both theoretical and practical) does not come from a deductive argument or experimental observation, but through a process of reflective equilibrium. "Such an 'equilibrium' is arrived at through a combination of (1) singular judgements (*sic*) (which are intuitively compelling to us) and (2) our systematization of these judgements into general rules; rules which also bring them into harmony with the judgements of other people. . . . this combination of intuition and systematization is a feature of all human reasoning."⁴

David Brink once described reflective equilibrium similarly while laying out his commitment to a coherentist account of justification: "Ideally, we should make trade-offs between the levels of theory and particular judgments in response to conflicts between the two, making adjustments here at one level and there at the other, until we have a theory that is, to borrow John Rawls's useful phrase, in 'reflective equilibrium' with our considered evaluative beliefs."⁵

Fellow Cornell realist Nicholas Sturgeon, too, follows the method of reflective equilibrium, beginning with certain considered judgments, and with the assumption that our theories, scientific and otherwise, are roughly right, then moves dialectically in this way between plausible general theses and plausible views about cases, seeking a reflective equilibrium. Sturgeon notes that, whereas he allows for the inclusion of moral beliefs among the initial set, others—like Gilbert Harman—do not. But he argues there's no non-question-begging justification for singling out moral beliefs as unwelcome in the initial set while allowing those of a scientific or commonsense nature.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

5. Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 66.

William Sorley once said that the true beginning of metaphysics lies in ethics. Like William James, he thought it a mistake to hold off on doing ethics until the task of worldview construction was complete, for such a methodology would result in a truncated perspective. Moral ideas need to be given their due, not paid short shrift. This comports with Sturgeon's charge against Harman that the exclusion of moral experience seems objectionably arbitrary. The deliverances of our moral experience, then, on this sort of view, are innocent until proven guilty, and can be taken to be, minus defeaters at any rate, *prima facie* reliable.

But not all moral knowledge is discursive; even the process of reflective equilibrium leaves room for considered intuitions, which can be variously construed. At least one important understanding of at least some moral intuitions is that they are knowable nondiscursively, so to this issue we now turn.

Nondiscursive Moral Knowledge

The distinction between nondiscursive and discursive moral knowledge parallels a finding of moral psychology. Psychologists distinguish between the “adaptive unconscious,” whose operations are fast, automatic, and effortless, and the operations of the conscious mind, which are slow and require work. As Erik Wielenberg puts it, “The cognitive system responsible for the former sort of cognition has come to be known as ‘System 1’ and the cognitive system responsible for the latter sort of cognition has come to be known as ‘System 2.’”⁶ Some psychologists suggest that the phenomenon of forming beliefs by way of cognitive processes to which we lack direct conscious access is common. If they are right, we can sometimes “know without knowing how,” as Kahneman puts it.⁷

Externalists when it comes to justification will likely disagree with internalists on whether System 1 cognition can justify beliefs. Since such cognition is not accessible in the relevant sense, access internalists may insist that its deliverances lack justification. Externalists would more likely demur, thinking that such deliverances potentially do confer justification. Since we are inclined to think certain moral

6. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 89.

7. See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

intuitions veridical, and in fact constitutive of moral convictions of the deepest ingression, we are quite open to certain nondiscursive ways of knowing, irrespective of whether or not just cognitive deliverances confer justification. Either System 1 cognition confers justification or it doesn't. If it does, that satisfies the properly justified true belief theorist of knowledge. If it doesn't, that still leaves open the possibility that knowledge is, say, warranted true belief, and warrant is achieved in such cases without noncircular justification. We are, frankly, considerably more sure of the truth it's wrong to set cats on fire for fun than what the right side is in the internalism/externalism access debate on justification.

An example of System 1 cognition is the childhood event mentioned at the start of this chapter. Had I been asked at the time to justify my conviction, I would likely have stammered and finally uttered in exasperation, "Well it's just obvious, isn't it?" This leads some theorists to be skeptical of intuitions and alleged nondiscursive moral apprehensions. Instances when someone, when pressed, has a hard time articulating the reasons behind a moral intuition, a System 1 deliverance, have been dubbed "moral dumbfounding." The fact that this phenomenon happens as much as it does has led some to suggest that people's moral judgments are often if not typically generated by something other than conscious reasoning. What is more, the tenacity with which most people continue to cling to the deliverances of their immediate moral intuitions—flailing about trying to justify them, rapidly trying out one reason after another and persevering even when their principles are shown to be inconsistent or irrelevant—has led Haidt to conclude, echoing Hume, "Reasoning was merely a servant of the passions, and when the servant failed to find any good arguments, the master did not change his mind."⁸

The idea of knowledge as something in the neighborhood of justified true belief continues to hold quite a bit of sway, but it is also well known that there are serious challenges leveled against it. One challenge comes from various Gettier-like counterexamples that seem to exhibit the features of justification, truth, and belief, but not knowledge. Such a challenge raises the possibility that the classical tripartite account of knowledge is not severally sufficient for knowledge after all. We will have

8. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), p. 98.

occasion to come back to Gettier cases later. Another sort of challenge questions whether justification, truth, and belief are all individually necessary for knowledge. For on occasion it would seem that we know certain things without having good evidence for them; our evidence seems to be problematically circular. Take the reliability of induction, for example. It seems to be predicated on an assumption that the future will resemble the past, but what's the evidence for such a proposition except that, in our previous experience, it's been that way? But this is to assume what's in question, namely, that the future will be relevantly like the past. Most consider inductive inferences to be an altogether legitimate form of reasoning, despite the intractable challenge we face to provide noncircular evidence for it.

Interestingly enough, such a challenge can be posed against a great many beliefs we hold to be true: that the world is more than five minutes old, that there are other minds, that we're not brains in vats, that this isn't a Matrix world. Such foundational assumptions seem to be the sort of beliefs that are so axiomatic they don't require evidence to be reasonable to believe. We can't provide good noncircular justification for them, but generally this doesn't detract from our confidence in them. They tend to be the beliefs on which we base other beliefs, rather than beliefs we infer to on the basis of previous evidence. Such beliefs nowadays are called properly basic beliefs, and some would suggest that they provide another reason to think that "justified true beliefs" are not quite the same thing as knowledge.

Contrary to the insistence or at least deep suspicion that nondiscursive inferences lack epistemic merit, their existence may instead be quite reflective of deep fidelity to the complex process of cognition, including moral cognition. William James recognized the need for an expansive conception of rationality and evidence. He saw that among what is constitutive of the delicate idiosyncrasy and labyrinthine character of the intellectual life are an incalculable number of intertwining historical, cultural, linguistic, temperamental, neurological, and volitional influences. Such vast complexity renders shallow and simplistic those appeals to evidence *per se* or the deliverances of a dispassionately judicial intellect—what contemporary psychologists would likely call System 2 cognition. The evidence in fact suggests that much of what passes for System 2 cognition is parasitic on the results of System 1 cognition. The well-known moral phenomenologists Horgan and Timmons, for example, speak of individuals possessing a moral principle "morphologically,"

as less a matter of propositional knowledge than a matter of know-how—"a skill that is or has become part of the individual's repertoire for negotiating her social world."⁹

Owing to the stigma attaching to intuitionism—an epistemic theory of the sort associated with G. E. Moore and involving an exotic moral faculty distinct from our normal belief-generating and evidence-gathering cognitive mechanisms—intuitions themselves are often eschewed as equally dubious. However, certain intuitions, far from expressing irrationality or manifesting epistemic indulgence, seem clearly to be a function of normal, healthy human cognitive functioning. Nevertheless, this is not to say that their manufacture is a simple process. It is rather, very likely, incredibly complex, and much of the process takes place beneath the surface of consciousness. In light of the particularly complex nature of moral cognition, the possibility that at least some moral beliefs might come about more directly and noninferentially is all the greater. One of James's favored descriptions of moral knowledge was a kind of discernment or divining power, a bringing to bear of all the resources at our disposal to catch a vision of reality and truth. The fact that moral propositions carry with them affective components, volitional aspects, and prescriptive dimensions, James seemed to recognize, requires more than a narrow understanding of cognition, but something more holistic and encompassing. James's expansive evidentialism inclined him at least in the direction of nondiscursive, immediately experienced, intuitively grasped moral insight.

According to Plantinga, the reason certain beliefs, to be rational, justified, and warranted, need not be evidentially supported by other propositions is because of the possibility that they are properly basic. Basic beliefs, on a foundationalist picture, are those starting-point beliefs on the basis of which other propositions are derived and inferred deductively, inductively, or abductively. They are not believed on the evidential basis of other propositions; one simply *sees* that they are true and accepts them. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga demonstrates the way testimony, memory, induction, and a range of other parts of our cognitive systems function to provide us with basic beliefs.¹⁰

9. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral Judgment," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 (2007): 285–286.

10. Plantinga notes that earlier in his career philosophers weren't asking the "meta-question" about why justification is important. He writes, "The exception was William James, whose

James defended the intellectual right of those *already with* certain preexisting tendencies to believe a proposition (against which there are no compelling arguments) to retain such a belief. Induction, the deliverances of memory, testimony, and, most importantly for present purposes, certain moral beliefs are all such that none of them can be noncircularly established as reliable. Yet they are all also such that at least the vast preponderance of people possess a strong tendency to believe them. This would seem to make the deliverances of such cognitive faculties conform to Jamesean liveness in this regard.

James's conviction that certain foundational convictions bear the non-discursive mark of rationality locates him in the company of contemporary epistemologists such as Plantinga, Hunter Brown insists:

James bears a closer family resemblance to a number of contemporary non-fideistic philosophers of religion than to the prudential fideists with whom he is more often associated. There is a significant resemblance, for example, between James's position and the positions held by some contemporary philosophers regarding epistemically "basic" beliefs. Discussion of what constitutes a properly basic belief is extensive. One common theme, however, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has put it, is that "the proper way to arrive at . . . a criterion [of basicity] is, broadly speaking, inductive." This way requires looking to certain existing beliefs in the process of producing a criterion of proper basicity, rather than beginning with the criteria of classical foundationalism, for example, which Plantinga, Sosa, and others have shown to have serious shortcomings. Norms of basicity should be developed from "below," as it were, avoiding what William Alston has deplored as the "epistemic imperialism" involved in the indiscriminate application of certain abstract standards of basicity. Such standards, he and many others argue, prematurely exclude claims to the reasonableness of certain widely existing beliefs, including theism, and dismiss prematurely the possibility of the proper basicity of such beliefs.¹¹

'The Will to Believe' . . . was widely anthologized and took the radical line (as it was then perceived) that if religious belief is a live option for you, and a forced option, then believing even without evidence is excusable." Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 70.

ii. Hunter Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 39 f.

So what we wish to suggest at this juncture is the reasonable claim that it's quite possible that certain foundational, axiomatic moral convictions might qualify as properly basic beliefs. James wrote in *Varieties* about various and sundry experiences that were as fully convincing as any direct sensible experience, and such experiences were reported in terms not just of personal edification or subjective feelings, but of "genuine perceptions of truth"—like the example at the beginning of the chapter. A widespread claim among such reports is that the noetic element involved in such instances more closely resembles an increased breadth and depth of insight than forms of comprehension garnered through conscious reasoning and empirical investigation, and that belief in their factuality is related closely to their insight into deep truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. James considered it his bounden duty not to neglect reports of such accounts in any thoroughly empirical study of the phenomenon of human experience.

Plantinga, more recently, in a similar way, contrasts the confidence and sense of certitude characteristic of certain sorts of phenomenology with the tentative, probabilistic inferences of arguments for the corresponding truths. Plantinga has dubbed the sense of congruity or certainty, of rightness and truth that accompanies such phenomenology, "doxastic evidence" or "impulsional evidence," showing his openness to a more expansive evidentialism potentially in line with James. Such evidence carries with it an assurance of conviction that exceeds what propositional evidence can provide. In light of the particularly deep ingressions of various moral convictions—the wrongness of torturing children for fun, for example—such moral beliefs are excellent *prima facie* candidates for properly basic beliefs. Giving up such convictions on the mere basis of their possible falsehood, or by a comparatively less principled embrace of a deflationary metaphysics, seems to run the serious risk of abandoning vitally important and crystal-clear truths on the basis of merely remote possibilities.

Suppose, for now, we countenance this possibility that some moral beliefs are properly basic, and other moral beliefs are the deliverance of conscious moral inference. This does not end the discussion, of course, but rather can serve to raise the question of whether or not such moral beliefs are susceptible to defeaters. Some indeed suggest that naturalism provides an undercutting defeater for moral knowledge. The rest of this chapter will explore this charge against naturalism. Options 3–4 from the first chart above will serve to structure the discussion, with a brief hat tip

toward 5. So the two main challenges to naturalism to be covered below will be a Gettier-like moral challenge (option 3 above) and challenges posed to moral justification (option 4 above). The worst-case scenario, mentioned briefly, will be the challenge that, on naturalism, our moral clock (or compass, if you prefer that metaphor) is systematically misleading (option 5).¹²

Moral Gettier Cases

Let's begin with the mildest criticism of naturalistic ethics and progressively look at the stiffer objections. Case (3) above, recall, was a Gettier case. This is a situation where justification, truth, and belief (JTB) obtain for a subject S, but S lacks knowledge. Before Gettier himself, Bertrand Russell used a clock example to show that JTB can be present without knowledge. Again, imagine that, unknown to the subject when he looks at the clock at 2 o'clock and sees that it reads 2 o'clock, the clock had stopped functioning exactly 24 hours before. He forms a justified true belief that it's 2 o'clock but doesn't know that it's 2 o'clock. So here none of the JTB conditions are called into question, but they are not jointly sufficient to generate knowledge.

The moral analogue of such a case would involve a cognizer, on the assumption of naturalism (and moral realism, for present purposes), forming a justified true belief that, say, setting cats on fire for entertainment is wrong, but the person would lack knowledge. In the clock case, it happens to reliably give the right time (by sheer coincidence), but isn't actually functional. The person who looks at the clock doesn't realize this, though, and naturally assumes it's both accurate and functional, and (at least potentially) justifiably so. Justification doesn't require certainty, after all, just good evidence. By the sorts of reasoning adduced above (pertaining to reflective equilibrium, deliberative indispensability, and the like), let's assume a person, on naturalism, can be justified in trusting her moral judgments, at least some among them, both discursive and nondiscursive. Assuming moral realism, the moral agent in such a case would hold

12. All three challenges assume the possibility of moral truth on naturalism, despite that the previous two chapters expressed some of our reservations about the adequacy of a naturalistic account of moral truth. The challenges of committed anti-realists and error theorists are important, but here we will confine our focus to issues epistemic; this is why the present question to be explored is whether naturalism poses an undercutting defeater for moral knowledge, not whether it poses a rebutting defeater to moral realism.

justified moral beliefs that, at least possibly, are also true. So why wouldn't she have knowledge?

Well, consider the following argument by Angus Menuge.¹³ He notes that a shared claim of evolutionary ethics (EE), the main if not only game in town for many secular ethicists nowadays, is that the moral sense of human beings is the result of their natural history. Since this is a contingent matter, it follows that our moral sense could have been different. Our moral judgments in that case would be potentially quite different from those we currently make. He illustrates the point by citing a famous excerpt from none other than Charles Darwin himself: "If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering."¹⁴ In such a scenario, humans might have *thought* that (select) acts of fratricide or infanticide were not only permissible, but obligatory.

Menuge makes a useful distinction here. He notes that Darwin is not clear about whether these counterfactual moral beliefs would correspond to a different moral reality, and this leaves the defender of EE with two options, which Menuge calls "Weak EE" and "Strong EE." Menuge writes, "For Weak EE, it is only moral psychology (our moral beliefs) that would be different if we had been raised like hive bees. So fratricide and infanticide might still be wrong even if we didn't think so. But for Strong EE, it is moral ontology itself (what *is* right and wrong) that natural history explains. And so in that case, had we been raised like hive bees, fratricide and infanticide would have been right."¹⁵

Strong EE's main problem is ontological by making anything like human rights objectionably contingent. *Being human* would not guarantee that someone has any particular rights, since such rights would also depend on the details of our natural history. This entails that no right to life is inherent, for we would not have it in virtue of being human, but, if at all, because of the way we were raised. Those raised like normal humans would have such rights, whereas those humans raised like hive bees would not, which seems to violate the principle of relevant difference by entailing

13. Angus Menuge, "The Failure of Naturalism as a Foundation for Human Rights," unpublished. <http://moralapologetics.com/tag/angus-j-l-menuge/> (accessed February 27, 2015).

14. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 102.

15. Menuge, "Failure of Naturalism."

that two classes of individuals have different moral value without there being a relevant difference between them. So Strong EE is unable to sustain the sort of moral commitment to intrinsic human value and universal human rights discussed in Chapter 5.

Menuge makes mention of other problems with Strong EE. For example, if rights are based on our natural capacities, then it will always be possible to find individuals who suffer physical and mental defects and thus do not have rights. Moreover, natural capacities are not uniformly distributed, and this would undermine the basic equality of human rights. We turn, though, to this one last central contention he makes about Strong EE, before turning our attention to Weak EE:

Underlying this failure of Strong EE [to recognize that human rights are not dependent on living conditions] is that it appears to confuse two notions of “good.” Natural selection can explain the retention of characteristics that are good *for* an organism, community, or species, in that they increase the likelihood of survival and reproduction. But as Richard Joyce points out, the fact that X is good for Y does not imply that X is morally good. Assassination is good for removing political leaders and exterminating people in gas chambers is good for ethnic purity, but this does not make either of them morally good. And the same point applies to the *biological* good. That mosquitoes serve malaria’s biological good does not imply that mosquitoes have any moral value, and the fact that (to use one of Darwin’s examples) tribal warfare serves the biological good of a particular tribe by enhancing cooperation and cohesion within it (even if the tribal warfare violates all conditions of a just war) surely does not imply that such tribal warfare is morally good: indeed it could constitute a major human rights abuse. And similarly, the fact that fratricide and female infanticide might be biologically good for human beings if they lived like hive bees does not imply that those behaviors would be morally good. Thus there is a logical chasm between what serves the biological interests of a species and what is morally valuable.¹⁶

16. Ibid. Also see Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 170.

Whereas Strong EE suffers from an ontological challenge, Weak EE suffers from an epistemic one. Weak EE, recall, is a modest thesis of moral psychology. Although it is consistent with the existence of objective moral truth and human rights, it faces an insuperable difficulty explaining knowledge of such realities. For had we been raised like hive bees, we would have believed that fratricide and female infanticide were right, which would have had nothing to do with moral reality. Even if the beliefs in question turn out to be true, Weak EE gives no grounds for thinking we could know moral reality; in fact, it gives us reason to think we couldn't.

As Menuge points out, epistemologists, internalists and externalists alike, agree that it is impossible to know that *p* if one is only right by accident in believing that *p*. "Thus," Menuge writes, "if I look at a broken clock that says 7:30 and it is 7:30, my belief is true, but I do not have knowledge because I was only right by accidental coincidence. A natural explanation of what went wrong here is this: the fact that it was 7:30 had nothing to do with why the clock said 7:30, and hence nothing to do with why I believed that it was 7:30."¹⁷

Note that, if we take Menuge to be justifiably trusting the clock he doesn't know is broken, Menuge is describing a Moral Gettier case: justified true moral belief that does not attain to knowledge. Just as the clock is not functioning, our epistemic moral faculties are not properly connected to moral truth. They are rather a function of contingent circumstances of our upbringing. They are at least possibly true, and for all we know—at least before we seriously think about the implications of Weak EE or naturalism more generally—and thus *prima facie* or subjectively justified. But even if so, they do not constitute knowledge.

Unfortunately for Weak EE, if it is true, then we are in a precisely similar situation regarding our moral beliefs. For on that view, natural history is causally relevant to our moral beliefs, but does not account for moral reality. One must also ask how likely it is that our beliefs would track moral reality if Weak EE is true. We have already seen that there is no logical connection between biological adaptedness (what is biologically good for an individual or species) and the moral good. If so, Menuge concludes, given the vast number of possible natural histories we might have had, it seems highly unlikely that our belief-forming mechanism would be apt for moral truth.

¹⁷ Menuge, "Failure of Naturalism."

Erik Wielenberg offers one sort of reply. He responds to a challenge similar to this one posed by Menuge that was issued by Sharon Street, who asks us to imagine that “we had evolved more along the lines of lions, so that males in relatively frequent circumstances had a strong unreflective evaluative tendency to experience the killing of offspring that were not his own as ‘demanded by the circumstances,’ and so that females, in turn, experienced no strong unreflective tendency to ‘hold it against a male when he killed her offspring in such circumstances, on the contrary becoming receptive to his advances soon afterwards.’”¹⁸

Adducing observations from Sarah Hardy, Frans de Waal, Joshua Greene, and others, Wielenberg suggests there is evidence to suggest that the emergence of moralizing species like ours requires an evolutionary path significantly different from that of lions or bonobos, “a path that would preclude the emergence of the psychological dispositions described by Street in the passage above, and would instead tend to generate psychological dispositions closer to the ones we actually have.”¹⁹ Wielenberg thus considers it a mistake to assume in casual fashion that it is nomologically possible for human beings to have evolved to possess morphologically radically different moral principles from the ones we actually possess. For all we know, he suggests, to find ourselves guided by a principle like the doctrine of double effect is an inevitable outcome of the evolutionary processes that made us capable of forming moral judgments in the first place.

Wielenberg’s own account of moral knowledge, which will be explained in more detail shortly, has been seen by some as susceptible to being “Gettierized,” since some kinds of luck threaten knowledge—like the coincidence of looking at the broken clock the moment it happens to be accurate—and Wielenberg admits there may be at least some luck involved in his account. Wielenberg, though, is skeptical that such luck is significantly different from the sort of luck that afflicts many of our nonmoral beliefs, and “so there is no special problem for moral knowledge” on his account, so he argues.²⁰ He admits that theism might appear to involve less luck than his own view, citing Parfit in this regard: “God might have designed our brains so that, without causal contact, we can reason in ways

18. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, pp. 170–173.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

that lead us to reach true answers to mathematical questions. We might have similar God-given abilities to respond to reasons, and to form true beliefs about these reasons.”²¹ Santayana once made mention of such a possibility too.

Wielenberg, however, further argues that all theistic metaethical theories will inevitably involve some brute ethical facts or other. For example, he notes that on Adams’s view the fact that we have powerful reasons to fulfill our moral obligations depends on the following pair of necessary truths: (1) there is a good God, and (2) we have reason to obey commands issued by good agents. “In this way,” Wielenberg writes, “necessary truths coincide in just the way required to generate reasons to fulfill our moral obligations—how convenient! Therefore, there is a plausible case to be made that the unexplained necessary coincidences worry has equal force against my view and a theistic approach to meta-ethics, and hence there is no advantage for the theistic approach here.”²²

We will explore this challenge to theistic ethics in the last chapter, but for now let us continue this discussion by looking at another epistemic objection to naturalistic accounts of moral knowledge. The new challenge doesn’t concede JTB and issue a Gettier challenge against knowledge, but instead questions the ability of naturalism to justify moral beliefs in the first place.

Justification Challenged

Earlier we saw how naturalists can use notions like reflective equilibrium and deliberative indispensability to undergird their account of moral justification. We saw too how a Cornell realist like Sturgeon argues for the permissibility of including considered moral judgments among the initial data set for purposes of the reflective dialectic. This is all quite right, in our view, but there remains a challenge to raise, because the initial ethical data set must prove to be compatible with one’s final interpretation of reality. Even if there is a strong impulse toward affirming initial justification for our considered moral judgments, they remain at least in principle defeasible. And if we find reason to conclude that our moral judgments were not aimed at the truth, but came about for other reasons entirely, such as facilitating survival, this could well

21. Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 493.

22. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 175.

defeat our moral judgments despite their initial plausibility and *prima facie* justification. If moral judgments can't be plausibly argued to track moral truth, efforts to justify them seem faced with an insuperable difficulty.

On naturalism, some would suggest that it is not only moral judgments that get epistemically called into question, but nearly all of our judgments, including judgments about the truth value of naturalism. Alvin Plantinga has notoriously challenged the conjunction of naturalism and evolution along these lines with what he calls "Darwin's Doubt."²³ If Plantinga is right, then evolutionary naturalism is saddled with a far-ranging skepticism that encompasses much more than ethics alone.

But our discussion does not require Plantinga's broader argument to go through; it delimits the discussion specifically to morality. The challenge here pertains to the dependence of moral beliefs on relevant would-be moral truth-makers. If such a dependence relation fails to obtain, then a tracking relation has not been established to show that our moral judgments essentially depend on actual moral truth. There may still be moral truths, but our justification for our moral beliefs will have been irremediably undermined. One reason for thinking that such a dependence relation obtains would emerge if the best explanation for a person's moral belief were essentially to involve the truth of that belief. But on evolutionary Darwinism, it would seem that an exhaustive genealogy of our moral beliefs can be provided without as much as broaching the issue of whether such beliefs are true.

Efforts to undermine a person's conviction on the basis of its genesis are often seen as dubious because they smack of the genetic fallacy. But not every such effort is fallacious. Basing one's estimation of the number of people in a crowded auditorium by a random drawing of numbers from a hat would clearly be an unreliable way to get at the truth, and its efficacy isn't salvaged or vindicated by accusing the critic of committing a genetic fallacy. Unless there is a connection between moral truth and our moral judgments, the dependence thesis is undermined, justification for our moral beliefs is lost, and a defeater for moral knowledge has been identified.

Gilbert Harman is well known for raising this sort of challenge to ethics.²⁴ His evolutionary debunking argument basically said that if moral

23. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 316–317.

24. Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977.

beliefs can be given an evolutionary explanation, then they can be explained without appealing to their truth, and thus they lack justification. If moral facts, if such there be, are explanatorily irrelevant in a way that natural facts are not, then ethics has a problem.

Other formulations include Kahane's, which echoes Menoge's approach and extends to all evaluative beliefs.²⁵ Another recent variant of this theme can be found in Michael Ruse's unconditional debunking of morality, but his is more of an attempt at rebutting moral realism than merely undercutting moral knowledge. Sharon Street's paper in which she poses to value realists in particular the "Darwinian Dilemma" is an especially important one to mention for present purposes.²⁶ She assumes our moral beliefs are fitness-aimed, but asks if they are also truth-aimed. Either there is a fitness-truth relation or there is not. If not, and evolution has shaped our basic evaluative attitudes, moral skepticism is in order. If there is a relation, then it is either that moral beliefs have reproductive fitness because they are true (the "tracking" relation), or we have the moral beliefs that we have simply because of the fitness that they have conferred (the "adaptive" link account). The adaptive link account leads to constructivism, she argues. The moral realist needs a tracking account, but Street thinks the notion of fitness following mind-independent moral truths is implausible. A tracking account of paternal instincts would have to say more than that the behavior tends toward DNA preservation; it would have to assert that such instincts were favored because it is independently true that parents ought to care for their offspring.

Richard Joyce is another contemporary debunker. He doesn't rule out the possibility that there are moral facts, but he thinks it unlikely we have any moral knowledge. Nonetheless he thinks there is wisdom in a fictionalist approach to ethics, acting as if there are binding moral truths for the purpose of social harmony and the like. But in terms of moral knowledge, he thinks what precludes it is that if an agent's moral belief can be explained without appealing to its truth, then the belief is a product of an unreliable process, and if so, it lacks justification.

Owing to space constraints, we are less interested in all the nuances of these various debunking approaches than in their general recurring and

25. Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," *Nous* 45, no. 1 (2011): 103–125.

26. Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (January 2006): 109–166.

integrating theme, namely, that on evolutionary naturalism our moral beliefs can't plausibly be thought to correlate with the relevant truths, even if those truths exist, thus undermining the justification of those beliefs and precluding knowledge of objective moral truth, at least on naturalism and perhaps also on non-naturalism and supernaturalism alike. At worst our moral belief-forming mechanisms are like darts thrown blindly, hardly likely to hit the small distant target of moral truth an ocean away, if there even is such a thing. This is the moral analogue of the clock that gives times produced by distant electrical signals entirely disconnected from the actual time.

Mark Linville uses the logic behind the debunking arguments in an effort to argue against evolutionary naturalism (EN) in this manner:

1. If EN is true, then human morality is a by-product of natural selection.
2. If human morality is a by-product of natural selection, then there is no moral knowledge.
3. There is moral knowledge, so
4. EN is false.²⁷

We have a great deal of appreciation for Linville's excellent analysis from which we have learned much (his influence is ubiquitous in this chapter and several others), but our preference is to couch any epistemic moral argument against naturalism in more abductive than deductive terms for reasons explained earlier in the book. We agree with much of his analysis, but prefer to deploy it in an inference to the best explanation rather than a straightforwardly deductive argument.

How might secular ethicists try to answer the logic of such debunking arguments, and how effective are their answers? To that issue we now turn.

Ethical Naturalists and the Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

Roughly, secular ethicists who remain moral realists tend to try grounding moral properties in natural properties either by saying moral properties are the same as natural properties or by saying that moral properties are different from natural properties but supervene on them (in a sense different

27. Linville, "Moral Argument," pp. 394 f.

from identity, perhaps like D-supervenience as discussed in an earlier chapter, understood as a making relation).²⁸ A paradigm of the former would be the Cornell realists, and of the latter such contemporary Platonists as David Enoch and Erik Wielenberg. Let's first discuss how the Cornell realists might try responding to the debunking objections, and then how the ethical non-naturalists do so.

Ethical naturalists like Boyd, Brink, and Sturgeon hold the more ontologically parsimonious position here. They don't posit that there are moral properties above and beyond natural ones. Whether such parsimony is a virtue, of course, depends on the explanatory adequacy of the account. We have largely conceded already that ethical naturalists are within their epistemic rights to think of their moral judgments as *prima facie* justified and deliberatively indispensable. The question at issue now is whether the evolutionary debunking arguments serve to provide an undercutting defeater for their moral beliefs. More generally, we are attempting to gauge the comparative adequacy of their account of moral knowledge in light of such challenges. For discussion purposes we will assume moral realism.

Sturgeon has ventured a reply to Harman's challenge that moral facts are explanatorily irrelevant. Consider Harman's example of Hitler. He suggests we need not suppose that, over and above such natural facts about Hitler as his anti-Semitism and will to power, there is a moral fact of Hitler's depravity. Nor is his depravity needed to explain our belief in it. This is an instance of Harman's assumption that the best explanation for our moral beliefs does not require reference to their truth. Sturgeon replies that moral facts are commonly and plausibly thought to have explanatory relevance. He comments, "Many moral explanations appear to be good explanations . . . that are not obviously undermined by anything else we know," and "Sober people frequently offer such explanations of moral observations and beliefs."²⁹

We are inclined to side with Sturgeon rather than Harman in this debate. Although we ourselves will identify moral values with theological properties instead of natural ones like Sturgeon and the other ethical naturalists do, either way what is suggested is an explanatory relation between real values and evaluative beliefs, which means that justified moral beliefs

28. Recall that this book is deferring treatment of anti-realists, moral subjectivists, and non-cognitivists until a later volume.

29. N. Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. G. Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 251.

would not be accidental. We suspect the ethical naturalists look to the wrong place to satisfy the explanatory constraint on justified belief, but their moral realism itself is not the problem. On that score we agree with them wholeheartedly.

We retain quite a few reservations about the metaphysical theory of naturalism or physicalism, which remains a highly speculative view issuing a great number of promissory notes, but we are inclined to agree with a reliance on something like bedrock moral starting points or intuitions or considered judgments, System 1 axiomatic moral commitments. Frankly, it makes better sense to put confidence in such obvious moral facts as the wrongness of child torture than in dogmatic assertions that such judgments fail to satisfy the constraints of conscious and discursive epistemic constraints. As Robert Adams writes, “I do not believe that epistemology, as a philosophical discipline, is in as flourishing a state today as substantive or ‘normative’ ethical theory; and I take it my view on this point is not eccentric, though it may be controversial.”³⁰

Still, the ethical naturalists have their hands full handling the debunking objections, particularly from the direction of Darwinian counterfactuals. Here Linville’s careful articulation of the problem they face is most apposite, just a few salient details of which we will repeat. In light of Sturgeon’s view about supervenience, there is no possible world in which Hitler has the properties he has in the actual world and is not depraved. Indeed, Sturgeon follows Kripke in suggesting that moral terms rigidly designate natural properties, so moral terms function in much the same way that natural kind terms do: picking out natural properties and tracking those same properties across worlds. So in a possible world in which the clear liquid good for drinking and bathing and found in streams and lakes is XYZ, the liquid isn’t water, even if it’s called “water.”

On Sturgeon’s view, likewise, “justice” picks out some natural property or properties, such as equity displayed in the distribution of societal goods. In a moral twin earth in which wolfish philosophers defend justice as *inequality*, Sturgeon’s strong supervenience view would entail that those philosophers are wrong. This seems to be an embrace of what Menage called Weak EE, which, recall, seemed saddled with an intractable

30. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 76.

epistemic challenge. Beyond the problems earlier associated with such a view, Linville adds this one:

But to insist that our moral terms rigidly designate specific earthly natural properties to which human sentiments have come to be attached appears to be an instance of what Judith Thomson has called *metaphysical imperialism*. . . . our ethical naturalist has identified justice as a particular set of natural properties upon which human evolution has, in fact, converged. Whatever circumstances of justice have obtained on Earth are contingent and fail to obtain in those Darwinian worlds. It seems that we have no more reason to think that *Earthly* justice is normative there than we have for denying that those denizens, who lack C-fibers, ever experience pain.³¹

Linville's argument is not that there is no possibly true story that can be told by the ethical naturalist, but "in considering the sorts of circumstances that Darwin describes, it seems that the most plausible explanation is that such counterfactual moral beliefs are formed as the result of selection pressures that are themselves in place due to the contingencies of the evolutionary landscape—contingencies that are morally indifferent."³²

As Linville puts it, there still may be room for a possibly true tracking account by the ethical naturalist—particularly if, as was suggested earlier, the range of Darwinian counterfactuals is quite a bit more limited than Street, Menage, or Linville imagines—so this is another reason to couch this argument against ethical naturalism in more abductive than deductive terms. The best explanation needs to be a good enough explanation, not a mere remote possibility. We also acknowledge the epistemic possibility of a true ethical account and dependence relation from ethical naturalism, but prospects that it will be the best explanation of moral facts and moral knowledge do not inspire confidence.

Robust Realism and the Debunking Arguments

David Enoch and Erik Wielenberg are contemporary ethicists who wish to avoid the force of the debunking arguments in a way that is different from

31. Linville, "The Moral Argument," p. 410.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

the ethical naturalists. Rather than trying to generate a tracking account, they wish to concede that our moral judgments are not likely directly caused by the relevant moral truths. In light of the common conviction that moral truths, even if they exist, are causally inert, such non-naturalists are often thought to have a harder task than do the ethical naturalists. For the record, this is not our own view; we suspect the non-naturalists are closer to being right than the ethical naturalists and Cornell realists, in light of the qualitative gap that exists between natural properties and moral ones. At any rate, both Enoch and Wielenberg endorse a “third factor” explanation to account for the correspondence between moral facts and human moral beliefs.

The logic behind such an explanation is that there is an alternative to a causal tracking account, an alternative to saying moral truths directly cause our moral beliefs. The relevant correspondence relation can be explicated in a different sort of way. In general, “if we can explain why (1) x causes y and (2) x entails z, then we have explained why y and z tend to go together.”³³ Wielenberg uses an example from the philosophy of mind to illustrate. If we can explain why brain state B causes action A and we can explain why mental state M supervenes on B, then we can explain why M and A tend to go together. This is their way to answer debunkers like Street who claim that realism must either view the causes described by evolutionary explanations as distorting influences or deny that moral truths are causally inert. For Wielenberg and Enoch, this is a false dilemma.

Enoch’s approach is laid out in his important recent book entitled *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*.³⁴ Enoch readily admits that the “robust realist” (like him) could simply endorse a brute correlation between moral truth and belief. But the best explanation requires more than that, so he sets himself to the task of explaining the correlation. He also points out the overall best or most plausible metanormative theory need not be shown to be the best account in every respect, with regard to every problem. So he simply aims to show that robust realism doesn’t lose too many plausibility points in responding to the epistemic challenges of the debunkers.

33. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 156.

34. David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Again, to show a correlation between A and B, two obvious approaches would be to show that A is responsible for B or vice versa, but another way to show the correlation is in terms of a third factor, C, that is (roughly speaking) responsible both for A-facts and for B-facts. “Pre-established harmony explanations, for instance, are always of this sort. And the realist-friendly explanation of the correlation I am about to offer is exactly such a third-factor explanation, or indeed a (Godless) pre-established-harmony type of explanation.”³⁵

Enoch’s solution is to assume that survival or reproductive success (or whatever else evolution aims at) is at least somewhat good—in the sense of better than the alternative. Not in every case, but at least generally. Moreover, selective forces have shaped our normative judgments and beliefs, with the aim of survival or reproductive success in mind (so to speak). In light of the fact that these are by and large good aims—aims that normative truths recommend—our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with normative truths. “Given that the evolutionary ‘aim’ is good, the fact that our normative beliefs have been shaped by selective forces renders it far *less* mysterious that our normative beliefs are somewhat in line with the normative truths. This is so, then, neither because the normative truths are a function of our normative beliefs, nor because our normative beliefs causally track the normative truths, but because our normative beliefs have been shaped by selective pressures towards ends that are in fact—and quite independently—of value.”³⁶ In this way, Enoch argues that the fact that (roughly speaking) survival is good preestablishes the harmony between the normative truths and our normative beliefs.

The last piece of the puzzle Enoch needs is something like Gibbard’s “normative governance” mechanism: our mental and motivational set-up seems to include our having evolutionarily beneficial beliefs.³⁷ Survival, then, is good, so behaving in ways that promote it is (pro-tanto) good; but one efficient way of pushing us in the direction of acting in those ways is by pushing us to believe that it is good to act in those ways.

35. Ibid., p. 168.

36. Ibid.

37. See A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), ch. 4.

Enoch's innovation here is clever and, we think, not without merit. It certainly has potential to solve the conundrum posed by the debunkers, but as a solution it bears little inherent connection with robust realism. For other worldviews, too, can affirm the value of human beings and their survival, and arguably better.

Wielenberg's approach is similar in his recent book *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, except he identifies a different third factor. He writes, "My third factor is certain cognitive faculties: the relevant cognitive faculties secure a correlation between moral rights and beliefs about moral rights because they entail the presence of moral rights and generate beliefs about such rights."³⁸ So, echoing Enoch, Wielenberg need not posit a causal tracking relation between moral rights and our beliefs about them; rather, the third factor, in this case the relevant cognitive faculties, entails the rights and generates the corresponding beliefs, thus guaranteeing a correlation despite the causal inertness of moral facts.

It seems rather clear why he thinks our relevant cognitive faculties generate beliefs about moral realities, but how is it, on his view, that those faculties entail, say, moral rights? Recall that on his view, following Parfit, he thinks normative reasons count in favor of having some attitude, or acting in some way. Normative reasons can be connected with claims about what we ought to do as follows: when we have decisive reasons, or most reason, to act in some way, this act is what we should or ought to do. Sometimes we have decisive moral reasons to act in a particular way. In such cases we have moral obligations. Correlative with a (perfect) moral obligation to another person is that other person's right to be treated (or not treated) in a particular way. So, in light of our cognitive faculties that recognize, on occasion, overriding normative reasons to act, rights are thereby entailed. This is an all-too-brief account of Wielenberg's very smart analysis, but we hope, for present purposes, we're doing it justice.

Our primary reservation about Wielenberg's account, as we explained in an earlier chapter, is that we don't think this "overriding normative reasons" account of moral obligations does justice to their authority, or what Evans calls the "Anscombe intuition" about obligations—and, thus, to corresponding rights. As this concern is more ontological than epistemic, we won't belabor the point here, but it leaves Wielenberg's account

38. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 145.

wanting. We are not opposed to a third factor approach, in principle, and think Wielenberg's approach has potential, but it requires a watered-down account of moral prescriptivity. As such, it's not his third factor approach that is deficient, but the particular third factor he employs. It does not, to our thinking, satisfactorily explain the existence of binding moral obligations and inextirpable human rights. Something in the neighborhood of Wielenberg's approach, however, seems to possess potential to avoid the debunking arguments.

So far we have examined the possibility that, on naturalism, we can have justified true beliefs about morality but not moral knowledge, and the possibility that we can have true moral beliefs lacking in justification, and thus lack of knowledge for that reason. We now finally want to consider the possibility that, on naturalism, moral knowledge is after all possible. Even in that case, so we will now argue, secular moral theory lacks an important element required by the best explanation of moral knowledge.

Ritchie's Explanatory Constraint

In his excellent and tightly argued book entitled *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of our Ethical Commitments*, Angus Ritchie offers a moral argument for theism, or at least a vital piece of a bigger argument to that effect. Theism, he argues cogently, explains the human capacity for moral cognition better than various secular rivals. For his pool of alternative candidates, he canvasses the field of metaethics. In this way he cuts to the heart of much of the contemporary ethical debate, and in so doing he highlights a serious and systemic problem facing secular positions that attempt to accommodate our pre-theoretical moral commitments. He also sketches a teleological and theistic alternative that he argues avoids such objections that prove intractable to the secular theories.

In terms of building a moral apologetic, Ritchie's treatment accomplishes three central tasks: it presses the distinction between justification and explanation of moral truths; it takes secular alternatives seriously enough to engage them with real ardor; and it spells out the theistic alternative.

Among the secular explanation candidates of moral cognition that Ritchie considers are those provided by Blackburn, Gibbard, Korsgaard, and the early Scanlon, who argue that our fundamental moral convictions can be accommodated without objectivism; and those of Foot, Crisp, and

the later Scanlon, who seek to combine a fully objectivist account of moral norms with no purposive agent or force. What all of these secular accounts have in common is their systemic flaw. In the case of the less objectivist theories the concessions made to reductionism leave them unable to do justice to our most fundamental moral convictions; those that accommodate the pull of objectivism generate an explanatory gap. The book's central contention is that all secular theories that do justice to our most fundamental moral convictions go on to generate an insoluble explanatory gap that consists in their inability to answer the following question: How do human beings, developing in a physical universe which is not itself shaped by any purposive force, come to have the capacity to apprehend objective moral norms?

Secular (non-teleological) theories only escape the explanatory gap by failing to vindicate our pre-philosophical moral commitments. The gap arises when the following commitments are combined: (1) robust moral objectivism, (2) secularism, and (3) the belief that humans, through the exercise of their normal belief-generating and belief-evaluating capacities, are able to apprehend the objective moral order. While secular theories can explain human acquisition of moral sensibilities and practices of reasoning, this does not tell us why those practices and sensibilities have the property of tracking the truth.

Regarding cognitive capacities (perceptual, theoretical, practical), three questions can be asked about their genesis and justification: (1) What is the *justification* for our faith in their reliability? (2) What is the *historical explanation* of their development? (3) What is the *explanation for their capacity for tracking truth*? It is just because Ritchie takes the fundamental convictions that emerge from reflective equilibrium to be justified (to have non-accidental correlation with objective moral norms) that the third question arises. So Ritchie stresses the importance that we not confuse the demand for an *explanation* for the reliability of our moral beliefs with the demand for a *justification* of our trust in the human capacity to acquire and modify our moral beliefs in a way that tracks truth.

In this way, Linville and Ritchie approach the question of moral knowledge from different angles. Linville's focus was on warrant (more broad than just justification, and consistent with knowing some propositions in a basic way), whereas Ritchie's is on the issue of the explanation of the reliability of moral cognition. Whereas Linville pushes in the direction of naturalism being a defeater for moral warrant and thus knowledge, Ritchie is more inclined to grant the naturalist moral justification, even knowledge,

but argue that naturalism fails to explain the truth-tracking ability of our moral cognition.

Ritchie's overall claim is that it is legitimate to raise questions of explanation with respect to the truth-tracking quality of humans' moral faculties because we see in natural selection a way in which explanation can be answered for our truth-tracking capacities for theoretical reasoning and with respect to the physical world. The ability to track truth is selectively advantageous in those cases (Ritchie's is a more delimited approach than Plantinga's). Natural selection is the obvious candidate for an explanation of the development within humans of truth-tracking capacities regarding fundamental principles of deduction, IBE, and induction. It is highly probable that we will be better able to survive if we hold true beliefs. So natural selection offers a story of how humans come to have truth-tracking capacities for theoretical reasoning; likewise for both physical perception and theoretical reasoning.

No such correlation is nearly so plausible in the moral case, however, he argues. On the account given by evolutionary biology, it is not the fact that moral beliefs are correct which leads to them being selected for. Rather, it is the fact that they are conducive to the flourishing of the collective. There is no guarantee that the qualities which lead to multiplication will have any other excellence about them. Any value system based on survival, replication, and pleasure alone is inadequate. Unless we have a wider teleological account, we have no reason to suppose that these valuations have any nonrandom connection with that moral order.³⁹

Ritchie argues that theistic and teleological explanation is better than nomothetic explanation that is given in terms of causal laws. Natural selection has led to resistance of teleology, but evolutionary naturalism is hard-pressed to offer a good enough explanation of our capacity for moral cognition, and nomothetic explanations are also unsuited to the task. Teleological explanation, Ritchie thinks, is the better way to go, a suggestion we will take up in the final chapter.

39. Beyond such a *prima facie* case, Ritchie turns to specific metaethical theories; consistent with the focus of this book, we will confine our attention to a few of the more objectivist approaches. The early Scanlon tried to accommodate the pull of reductionism by stressing rational procedures rather than an ontologically distinct moral reality, using the metaethics of Korsgaard discussed earlier in the book. Later Scanlon moved toward a more objectivist position, describing himself as a "Reasons Fundamentalist," contrasting the position with Korsgaard's. Reasons Fundamentalism (RF) insists on the irreducible character of normativity. Scanlon has satisfied the justification condition, Ritchie argues, but has not provided the explanation of reliability. Once more, secular accounts fall foul of our most fundamental

This chapter has been a bit labyrinthine, so a quick summary is in order. Regarding moral knowledge as a result of discursive analysis, certain axiomatic moral intuitions, or certain properly basic moral propositions, we are inclined to think, if we assume moral realism, that, on naturalism, such knowledge is possible. We acknowledge that naturalism faces some stiff criticisms from those who Gettierize their analysis or challenge the naturalists on the issue of moral justification. However, rather than arguing that, on naturalism, moral knowledge would be precluded, we are inclined to argue that theism provides the better explanation of knowledge. Third factor solutions strike us as having potential to answer the evolutionary debunking arguments; but such solutions are consistent with theism, there are reasons to think that theism could better deploy such solutions, and theism has additional resources to account for moral knowledge. All of these points comport well with Ritchie's argument that, even if moral knowledge is consistent with naturalism, a better explanation for what makes such moral knowledge possible can be found in theism, one of the points we will spell out in more detail in our final chapter.

moral commitments, or in vindicating them they generate an explanatory gap. Likewise Foot's theory using "Aristotelian categoricals" is trapped in this dilemma: we can define "good" naturalistically, in which case it is reduced to that which enables the species to replicate and perhaps increase in complexity, but then what we call good we do not have good reason to promote. Or define "good" to include evaluative judgments; but then we have gone far beyond anything those Aristotelian categoricals could justify. To make this choice is to concede that the idea of flourishing is itself heavily moralized, and there is no longer any sign of a purely biological story of natural normativity from which morality might emerge. McDowell wants to defend moral realism. Instead of seeking to ground ethics in a non-moralized account of the natural world, McDowell urges Foot to acknowledge that ethical reasons are themselves part of any adequate account of nature. Ritchie insists, though, that there remains an explanatory question which McDowell is unwilling to answer, distinct from justificatory issues. Unless McDowell is urging a return to a fundamentally purposive account of the universe, the question of how we explain (rather than justify) the reliability of our belief-generating and belief-correcting processes will arise for him in a way it did not for Aristotle—who, incidentally, contrasted the natural not with the supernatural but the artificial.

Moral Transformation

*God bids us do what we cannot, that we may know
what we ought to seek from him.*

AUGUSTINE

A RECENT DOCUMENTARY concerning the issue of nutrition and physical health made several interesting points. One of its initially startling claims resonates with truth after all, namely, that doctors, as wonderful as they are, do not really produce health. About the best they can do is remove some barriers that impede and stand in the way of health. They might set a bone, remove a tumor, or prescribe some medicine; but, once they do, the body takes over. What actually produces health is the properly functioning body—a healthy immune system, a body, properly treated and fed, doing what it was meant to do.

This is most clearly seen when it comes to chronic diseases. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies cannot fix such problems; the best they can do is provide medicines that help alleviate and manage certain symptoms and make life more comfortable for the patient, even while the affliction persists.

Although medical practitioners are rather limited in what they are able to do, the body is remarkably resilient in its ability to ward off diseases, recover from various injuries, and heal itself. This is why, as the documentary argued, proper nutrition and exercise are so important, because they enable the body to do what it does best. Chronically undernourished or sedentary bodies eventually become impaired in their ability to perform their proper functions.

One of the more controversial aspects of the documentary was its claim that it is possible that even certain chronic conditions can substantially improve, if not go away altogether, when radical steps are taken to ensure proper nutrition and exercise. Whether or not some of the more ambitious

claims of the documentary are true—and we are not taking a position on that—the general point was well made: there is simply a crucial difference between genuine health, on the one hand, and merely treating conditions, on the other, however much a blessing the latter can be.

This chapter will employ a very similar distinction in the arena of morality. One option is merely to deal with symptoms, settling for marginal moral improvements, and avoiding hurtful consequences by our actions. True achievement of integrity, virtue, and holiness, though, requires considerably more. In light of what seem to be some deeply entrenched patterns of selfishness and moral weakness endemic to the human condition, secular theories of morality feature severely limited resources to effect the deep moral transformation that we need and that morality itself seems to require.

In the summative chapter we will return to the issue, and argue that classical theism and orthodox Christianity possess the necessary resources for moral transformation without, as John Hare puts it, reducing the moral demand, artificially exaggerating human capacities, or settling for substitutes for divine assistance that do not suffice. We follow Hare's lead in accentuating this pivotal aspect of moral apologetics: showing how we as human beings, replete as we are with all manner of moral deficiencies and weaknesses, can actually become moral, and ultimately undergo complete moral transformation.

The Moral Gap

C. S. Lewis once offered a memorable picture of the moral enterprise. He envisioned a fleet of ships, each individual member of which needs to be seaworthy, in sufficient working order, able to float and navigate. The ships also need to avoid running into one another. Thirdly, the fleet needs a destination; they need a goal to be moving toward.

Analogously, when it comes to morality, each of us as human beings needs to be morally healthy ourselves. We also need to be able to live harmoniously together, and each and all of us need a goal, an end, a destination, a *telos*. Ethics encompasses all three dimensions: it is about individuals flourishing in moral health, harmonious interpersonal interaction, and all of us striving toward a moral destination. This chapter's focus, the topic of moral transformation, touches on all three issues: individual moral transformation; larger cultural issues of societal transformation; and the goal or *telos* of human beings, if there is such a thing.

Whenever moral arguments for God's existence are presented, atheists and skeptics often bristle at what they perceive to be a latent assumption: that people who do not believe in God cannot be moral. They understandably are indignant at the implicit accusation, mainly for two reasons: religious folks themselves are often not prodigiously moral people (sometimes just the opposite!), and plenty of unbelievers are moral indeed. This is quite true.

The usual tack at this juncture by proponents of various moral arguments is to concede the point and make sure that their interlocutors understand that the important claim they are advancing is not that skeptics are morally weak or deficient. In fact, plenty of secular people hold deep moral convictions and exhibit tremendous integrity, with a heart for the homeless and helpless and disenfranchised. This is why C. Stephen Evans, for example, makes it clear that the moral case he gives is not the view that religious *belief* is necessary to be a moral person. "This seems implausible," he writes, "since there seem to be many non-religious people of high moral character, and I have no reason to argue otherwise."¹

Nevertheless, having discussed numerous preliminary metaphysical and epistemic issues, we wish now to deal at some length with this *performative* question, the issue of actually becoming moral persons, undergoing the moral transformation that all of us need. As long as "being moral" is treated in a merely comparative sense, atheists and agnostics of various stripes are well within their rights to insist that, relative to plenty of professing theists, they are quite moral indeed. It remains our conviction, however, that this is not all that needs to be said on the matter. For though morality, so to speak, celebrates every step in the right direction, no matter how tentative or incremental, it seems to impose a demand for more. If we move from four unjustified lies a day to two, that's no doubt an improvement, but morality won't rest content with such marginal improvement alone. It still speaks and tugs, beckoning for our attention, calling us toward the goal, ultimately, of nothing less than moral perfection. So the question that this chapter intends to explore is this: What are the prospects that naturalistic and secular ethical accounts can offer for moral transformation?

1. C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

Another way of putting the question is this: How well do secular ethics fare in dealing with the “moral gap”? This is a phrase coined by a former colleague of Evans’s, philosopher John Hare, who has written a book by this very title. The gap exists between our best efforts to live the moral life and the moral demand itself. The violation of ethical standards strikes most of us as simply inevitable. Through dint of effort we might register a few nominal moral successes, but we often seem saddled with moral vulnerability, too little empathy, too much weakness of will, to live up to our highest moral standards, much less our highest ideals. Benjamin Franklin once set himself to the formidable task of achieving moral perfection. In “Arriving at Perfection,” an excerpt from his *Autobiography*, he wrote:

It was about this time I conceiv’d the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish’d to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ’d in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason.²

Franklin found it harder to be moral than he had previously imagined. The ensuing result of his efforts was his recognition of this gap between his most arduous moral efforts and the exacting demands of morality. Such a picture of a moral demand too high for humans to achieve on our own brings to mind C. S. Lewis’s version of the moral argument that began with two recognitions. Having argued for the reality of an objective moral law (the first recognition), Lewis then suggested that none of us is really keeping it (the second recognition). His point was not a judgmental or self-righteous one; he was quite willing to admit that he belonged among the moral lawbreakers. He identified what he considered to be a rather obvious fact: that “this year, or this month, or, more likely, this very day, we have failed to practice ourselves the kind of behavior we expect

2. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 38. Available online: <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page38.htm>. (Accessed February 28, 2015.)

from other people.”³ He knew that all of us have long lists of excuses for our moral failings, and he set aside whether such excuses are good or not. “The point is that they are one more proof of how deeply, whether we like it or not, we believe in the Law of Nature.”⁴ Lewis said that we believe in it profoundly, feeling its force and authority, and we try to hide our shame and guilt for failing to live up to it.

Lewis concluded this way: “These, then are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.”⁵

Immanuel Kant, similarly, recognized an exacting moral demand and a correlative inability on the part of human beings to meet such a demand, at least without some sort of outside assistance. Kantian “moral faith” includes two convictions: first, that the moral life is possible, and, second, that a life of true happiness must be a moral life, that morality and happiness must converge. The latter issue, pertaining to the convergence of happiness and virtue, will be discussed next chapter. This chapter will explore the question of whether the moral life is achievable, including the process of moral transformation and even the hope for something like moral perfection. Because of the central role Kant plays in both discussions, each chapter will feature dialogue with certain of his key ideas, highlighting both their insights and potential deficiencies.

If morality makes us aware of a demand on our behavior, character, intentions, and motivations beyond what we can accomplish through our best effort, perhaps this feature of morality provides additional evidence about the sort of explanation required to account for morality. Note that a full-fledged moral account has to encompass matters of character and virtue, not just a consideration of moral behaviors. Morality pertains not only to *what we do*, but to *who we are*. Its demands go beyond dictating how we ought to behave, and speaks to issues of entrenched character traits, attributes of our most inward interior lives. Sometimes the most sanctimonious of people on the outside can be among the most

3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 18.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

incorrigibly perverse on the inside; recall the characterization of certain Pharisees in the days of Jesus as “whited sepulchers,” shiny and clean on the outside, lauded religious leaders, but on the inside full of dead men’s bones.

Kant wrote quite a bit both about the need for radical moral transformation and the challenge associated with explaining how this happens in light of our tenacious and often willful resistance to it. Perhaps as a vestige of his Lutheran upbringing, Kant was secure in his conviction that human beings have a deep moral problem, a tendency to be curved inward on themselves, an intractable ethical taint, a deeply flawed moral disposition in need of a revolution. The most important consequence of Kant’s recurring insistence that moral judgments must be universalizable is that a moral agent is not allowed to make special exemptions or exceptions for himself. This would require individual reference to himself, of course, but Kant’s aversion to such a maneuver was at least in part a function of his recognition that the root moral malady afflicting us all is a tendency to privilege our own interests above our moral duties. Kant saw clearly that the moral demand on us is very high, while also recognizing that we have a natural propensity not to follow it, privileging Scutus’s affection for advantage.

Kantian ethical theory, with its many facets and intricacies, can easily become an unwieldy and thorny terrain, but it is telling that implications from all three variants of the categorical imperative concern our duties to others and the communities of which we are a part. For example, at one point when discussing the Universal Law variant of the categorical imperative—act only on those maxims we can consistently will to become universal laws—Kant said that there are, in the end, only two maxims, the good maxim and the evil maxim, and that all actions come from one or the other. The good maxim subordinates all desires to duty, while the evil maxim subordinates duty to the desires.

An implication of the second variant of the categorical imperative drives home the point that preoccupation with oneself is at odds with the moral demand; for the Formula of the End in Itself version of the categorical imperative—treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means—requires even more than paying heed to others as centers of agency. It further suggests that we are required to share, as far as possible, the ends of others. Likewise, on Kant’s conception of the Kingdom of Ends variant of the categorical imperative, we are tied together by our needs and abilities into a single unit or kingdom, which we must be prepared to will into existence as a whole. We are to act as though we are, through our

maxims, lawmaking members of a kingdom of ends—a systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws.

Although this demand not to privilege oneself is an important part of the moral law, on Kant's view, we continually run up against human limitations. It may well be practically impossible to find anyone motivated purely by respect for the moral law, which Kant recognized would not make us happy anyway because of our other needs. But there's a yet deeper problem: the pervasive influence of what Kant calls the "dear self." What we encounter, as a result, is a recurring emergence of a gap between how we behave and how we ought to behave, between indicatives and imperatives, is and ought.

On a Kantian picture, we all ought to behave in a certain way, in accord with the moral law, but at the same time we encounter intractable obstacles. Our natural capacities are not up to the task. Yet the moral demand remains pressing on us—a demand whose deliverances we lack the sensitivity and sympathy to figure out and abide by, but whose content could be both figured out and actualized by the perfect moral thinker and paradigm. Because God and God's thoughts remain in the noumenal realm beyond our ability to know fully, Kant thought, we can't know that our maxims are God's. What he counseled, though, was that we proceed in such a predicament to act as if our maxims were God's. So on this view, God is the authoritative source of the demand. But without adequate resources to meet the moral demand, this introduces the moral gap, and its consequent sense of moral failure and the conceptual difficulty that we labor under a demand too prohibitive, well beyond our capacities. Notice the same discursive structure in Lewis later: the moral law, and our failure to meet it.

In both Kant and Lewis, the suggestion seems to be not just that we happen de facto to fail to meet the moral demand, but that our failure is inevitable. If morality requires of us what we cannot do, however, then we might complain. *Ought implies can*, after all, an axiomatic principle of deontic logic. So if morality is beyond our reach, exceeding our natural capacities, then perhaps it does not carry the authority we thought it did. If we cannot live up to the standard, then it is not the case that we ought to. Lewis once anticipated this objection, saying that, even if moral perfection is beyond our grasp, we're hardly entitled to complain because, likely this hour, we could and should have done morally better than we did.

Lewis is undoubtedly right, but the objection still presses, because we can't take a standard as authoritative if it's impossible to meet it. But there's

another possibility here. The challenge would be a formidable one, perhaps insuperable, if indeed it were the case that there are inadequate resources to tap into and avail ourselves of in order to meet the moral demand. On the other hand, if such resources exist, there may be a duty to use them, and neglecting them might be culpable. The operative deontic principle, then, when confronting the moral gap, might not be “ought implies can,” but rather “ought implies can with the help available,” and therefore we ought to seek that help. So, if naturalism does not offer enough resources to hold out the realistic hope for moral transformation, it does not follow that the high moral demand is unreasonable, but rather that naturalism itself may simply be inadequate to the task. Rather than naturalism and its limitations vitiating the moral law or undermining its authority, the moral demand itself might give us evidential reason to see the deficiency of naturalism and secular ethical theory. Once more, evidence from ethics itself would have shed light on other areas of inquiry; rather than asking what prescriptions follow from which empirical statements of fact, the more important question may well be what the existence of moral verities reveals about reality, the very consideration we saw Neiman resist in Chapter 3 and Sturgeon, James, and Sorley privilege in Chapter 6.

Incidentally, the fact that Kant himself thought that morality pointed to the existence of God makes the use of Kantian ethical theory by self-professed naturalists more than a little ironic. The attempt to excise the theistic elements from Kant’s moral theory to see what can be salvaged and what is able to stand on its own feet is an altogether worthwhile effort, one we wish not to disparage or impugn. But the strategy, we suspect, involves a more radical revision of Kant than is often realized. Perhaps contributing to such secularizing efforts of Kant, admittedly, were his own rationalistic efforts to translate the traditional doctrines of historical Christianity into terms that did not make specific references to revealed religion or special revelation. But what motivated Kant was his rationalism, not naturalism, a doctrine to which he most assuredly was not committed.

At any rate, what emerged clearly from Kant’s ethical theory, before the theological excisions, was something of a threefold structure: (1) a prescription for a moral way of life, (2) a standard too difficult for humans to live by, but (3) an at least possible being able to meet the standard, that is, God.⁶ Moral imperfection tenaciously fastens to us all, believer and unbeliever

6. Secular expositors of Kant can endeavor to construct or otherwise derive a Kantian ethic free of its religious roots, but they should at least be willing to acknowledge the heavy

alike. What are we to do once we recognize this sad state of affairs? If we get beyond the denial that we are morally deficient, like honesty would demand, the options for the secular ethicists to close the gap appear to be these: they can exaggerate our capacities to be moral, they can lower the demand of morality itself, or they can identify some set of secular substitutes for divine assistance in meeting the demand. We will discuss each option in the remainder of this chapter, following Hare's lead.

Before moving on, let us pause to consider a pertinent passage from C. S. Lewis. Having started his book *Mere Christianity* with talk of the moral gap, just as we have here, he then explained his reason for doing so, and his explanation is a telling one. The passage, which speaks for itself, is his concluding paragraph of Book 1:

My reason was that Christianity simply does not make sense until you have faced the sort of facts I have been describing. Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk. When you know you are sick, you will listen to the doctor. When you have realized that our position is nearly desperate you will begin to understand what the Christians are talking about. They offer an explanation of how we got into our present state of both hating goodness and loving it. They offer an explanation of how God can be this impersonal mind at the back of the Moral Law and yet also a Person. They tell you how the demands of this law, which you and I cannot meet, have been met on our behalf, how God Himself becomes a man to save man from the disapproval of God. It is an old story and if you want to go into it you will no doubt consult people who have more

role played by theism in Kant's original analysis and some of the more genuinely difficult attempts to retain a Kantian spirit without it. Without Christianity, "it would have been more natural to propose a theory in which full-fledged morality was what humans are capable of by their own devices." In Kant's approach there clearly survives "belief in a perfect and infinite moral being, whom we can imperfectly resemble, and who created us to resemble him more than we do." John Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 24.

authority to talk about it than I have. All I am doing is to ask people to face the facts—to understand the questions which Christianity claims to answer. And they are very terrifying facts. I wish it was possible to say something more agreeable. But I must say what I think true. Of course, I quite agree that the Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in the dismay I have been describing, and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay. In religion, as in war and everything else, comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.⁷

Lewis thought that God can do more than merely ameliorate the symptoms of our chronic moral malady; the whole thrust of Christian thought proclaims it to be so. In the face of our urgent need to become new men, for a revolution of the will, for radical moral transformation, its message is “good news.” The question that we are considering here is whether a secular worldview and ethic can hold out any analogous hope. How its narrative and resources confront the moral gap is the question to which we now turn.

Puffing the Capacities

On Kant’s view, human beings are in a moral quandary. On the one hand, their inclinations toward privileging the self are strong indeed; on the other hand, satisfying the moral demand requires willing the good maxim, which is just what they are precluded from doing because of their corrupt inclinations. What Kant saw was needed was no mere tweaking of the moral paradigm, but a wholesale replacement, a revolution of the will. Kant called “Spener’s problem” (after the Lutheran priest Jakob Spener) our need to become not just *better* men, but *new* men. Without such a radical change, we are irremediably bound not to satisfy the moral demand.

This is not to say that Kant was always consistent. For example, contrary to his insistence that we are in need of extra-human assistance, he

7. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 35–36.

also at times seemed to endorse the “Stoic Maxim,” the notion that a person must make or have made herself into whatever, in a moral sense, she is to become, whether good or evil. This affirmation stands in obvious tension with an appeal to a higher, and for humans inscrutable, divine assistance. Such assistance was seen by Kant as the solution to the antinomy created by (1) our duty to undergo a revolution of the will by which our desires are made subordinate to our duties, and (2) the impossibility for us to effect such a revolution because of our propensity to evil. Extirpation can only occur through good maxims, and can’t take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all maxims is postulated as corrupt. Only extra-human help, likely divine assistance, can solve a problem so deep. But when Kant tried his experiment of translating Christian doctrines into rational and moral categories expunged of particular references, the need for extra-human assistance was excluded from the picture. (This translation project of Kant’s has led some to conjecture, as we saw earlier with William James, that Kant reduced religion to morality; but this is to misconstrue the import of what Kant was trying to do.)⁸ Again, though, it does good to bear in mind that what was motivating Kant was his rationalism, not anything like contemporary skepticism; as John Hare puts it, we should avoid hearing Nietzsche’s voice in Kant’s work coming through louder than Luther’s.⁹

Sticking to the Kantian structure of a very high moral law, an original human predisposition to do good but also an inflated sense of our own interests and concerns, and the need for something to close the resultant moral gap, one secular strategy is to exaggerate our natural capacities to live morally and thereby satisfy the moral demand. Kant himself anticipated and rejected this approach when he referred to “man’s self-conceit and the exaggeration of his powers.”¹⁰

John Hare finds in Shelly Kagan, author of *The Limits of Morality*, a contemporary example of someone who puffs up the human capacity to live the moral life. Kagan is a utilitarian who claims that if all our beliefs were *vivid*, including especially our beliefs about the interests of others, we

8. For an excellent treatment of this question of whether Kant’s religious views were reducible to ethics, see S. Palmquist, “Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?” *Kant-Studien* 83 (1992): 129–148.

9. Hare, *Moral Gap*, p. 50.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures in Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1930), p. 126

would tend to conform to the impartial standard that utilitarian morality requires. Hare thinks that the problem of the moral gap is conspicuous within moral theories often distinguished from Kant's, like utilitarianism, although he refrains from saying that all versions of utilitarianism succumb to the temptation to hyperbolize human capacities (though he thinks there has been a tendency in utilitarianism from the beginning to produce versions of the doctrine that do exaggerate in this way).¹¹

Utilitarianism is notorious for, on occasion, dictating demands that seem prohibitive, inordinately challenging to fulfill, too much at odds with our natural inclinations. Consider the feature of utilitarianism that dictates impartiality between persons. A great many people maintain a standard of living next to impossible to justify on the basis of utilitarianism. Practically any money spent on entertainment, for example, would be better spent in aid relief to help ameliorate the lives of the impoverished. Money for a single movie ticket would be enough to feed a starving Somali for a week. But, as Hare writes, "... the demand for impartiality is not consistent with the human tendency to give more weight to the agent's own interests than the utilitarian principle allows."¹² For Kant, the problem is that our initial condition, before the revolution of the will, is one of *preferring* happiness to duty. Our own interests tend to have more motivational force for us than they should. Hare puts it this way: "We are prone to give more weight to our own interests, just because they are ours, than the utilitarian principle allows."¹³

The problem is this. If it is the case that we ought to do something, then it must be the case than we can do it—and not just in the counterfactual sense of "I could do it if I wanted to, but I just happen not to." We must be able to want to. But if Kant is right and we are under the sway of our desires as a whole, before the revolution of the will, the desire to do our duty will not have the requisite force to overcome our other desires—at

11. Sam Harris seems to endorse a utilitarian analysis in his book *The Moral Landscape*. Interestingly enough, the book includes a section called "Is Being Good Just Too Difficult?" His answer seems to be that living the moral life, with only resources of our own, is difficult, but not impossible. Whether this involves a subtle puffing of human capacities, lowering of the moral demand, or elements of both, is not altogether clear; but the position we will endorse instead is that the moral standard is not just uncomfortably high, but out of reach if all we have are our own resources. See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010), pp. 82–85.

12. Hare, *Moral Gap*, p. 101.

13. Ibid., p. 102.

least not regularly. So it is not clear that we are able to want most of all to do our duty. But if ought implies can, then a denial of "can" implies a denial of "ought." Impartiality for the utilitarian seems an impossible demand, if all our desires are filtered through the bias towards our own interests. For how can we come to be motivated by the desire above everything else to do what impartiality requires?

An "optimistic" utilitarian like Kagan would likely reply that prudence counsels that we not (generally) privilege what we want now over what we will want in the future. I can be moved by the thought of what prudence would prescribe, even if I am not presently moved equally by the future interest. By attending to the future interest, I can make the belief about it more vivid. The optimist then insists we can say the same thing about morality. We have a bias towards our own interests, yes, but morality is still binding on us. We can be motivated by the thought of what we would be motivated by if our beliefs about the interests of others were as vivid as our beliefs about our own interests. The optimist thus makes a counterfactual claim: If my beliefs were vivid, I would tend to conform to the impartial standpoint.

Hare, though, asks if this counterfactual is true. There is moral power in vividness, to be sure, but he still harbors doubts the counterfactual is true. To explain why, he draws a careful distinction. Vividness, he says, might capture the idea of degree of clarity and distinctness attending a belief we hold, or it might pertain instead to the degree of wholeheartedness with which we care about the belief (or the degree of importance we attach to it). We can be quite clear about someone's pleasure without caring about it much at all. The counterfactual is about cognitive shortcomings. Increased tendency towards impartiality does not necessarily result from greater clarity; and even if it did, it would not necessarily result in an overall tendency towards impartiality. It is not just an increase that is needed, after all, but that the tendency to impartiality becomes greater than half.

Moreover, this is supposed to apply to everyone, but there are misanthropic people who are either indifferent to the interests of others or enjoy causing them distress. Love of power, envy, fear, and resentment are often operative even in families where awareness of the needs of others is great. There's willful blindness, too; some choose not to be vividly aware of the need for, say, famine relief. Hare notes that another strategy is rationalization in terms of some normative principle that takes the appearance of objectivity, but derives its motivational power from its convenience as a

disguise for self-interest. And even more importantly, if we stop thinking of vividness as a cognitive matter, but as a matter of caring, one may simply not care about morality enough, even if one recognizes that morality calls for a certain response.

Even if not everyone allows self-interest to trump, can we try to do what we know we will never be able to do by our own efforts? Nothing more than marginal improvement may be able to be realistically envisioned; and as Hare puts it, there has to be a point in trying. Impartiality as it is construed by the utilitarian principle requires *no* bias towards the agent's own interests. This is "like trying to jump to the moon," and recognizing this we see that it is futile to try to do it if more than marginal improvement is the goal.¹⁴ Complete impartiality is beyond natural capacity, and cultivating vividness is not enough to close the gap. Perhaps it's possible with God's help, Hare says, but doing it without such assistance seems impossible.

Again, Hare admits that utilitarianism *per se* is not required to exaggerate in this way. Hare's father R. M. Hare, for example, dealt with the gap in a different way. Still, Hare concludes his treatment like this: "Utilitarianism is the inheritor of a tradition, expressed for example in Kant, according to which living by impartial morality requires a *revolution* of the will. Utilitarianism could be construed as a theory, like Kant's theory in the *Groundwork*, about what our lives would be like after such a revolution, but then the theory needs a supplement about how human beings can get to the position in which the demand of the utilitarian principle can be lived."¹⁵

Reducing the Demand

Another strategy to close the moral gap is to reduce the moral demand, making it somehow less applicable, less prohibitive, less binding. Again, Kant anticipated such an effort when he wrote that "we may imagine that the moral law is indulgent as far as we are concerned," but this is an approach that he did not take.¹⁶ Still following Hare's lead, we intend to examine some feminist views that, in various ways, embody this approach of reducing the moral demand. The first strategy we will consider highlights moral

14. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

16. Kant, *Lectures in Ethics*, p. 126.

differences between the genders, suggesting that women are better suited to meet the moral demand than men are. The second strategy considers a range of ways that the universalist and impartiality constraints in Kantian and utilitarian ethics are challenged by various care ethicists.

C. S. Lewis once referred to the “hidden or flaunted [. . .] sword between the sexes,” which Lewis himself thought could be removed by what he called an “entire marriage.”¹⁷ Stereotypes only fortify such a wall that sometimes does seem to exist between those of different genders. Generally speaking, women, so say such stereotypes, are empathetic, emotional, relational—the feelers. Men, in contrast, are assertive and rational—the leaders and problem solvers, the thinkers. Or worse: aggressive, exploitative, predatory. Why, after all, are 90 percent of people in jails male? Why are the majority of violent sociopaths in our society men, and why is the number so high?

Feminist Carol Gilligan is well known for arguing in her influential book *In a Different Voice* that women deal differently with moral dilemmas than men. Women, she claims, are more caring, less competitive, less abstract, and more sensitive than men in making moral decisions. Because they speak in this “different voice,” their culture of nurturing, caring, and peaceful accommodation could cure the world governed by hyper-competitive males and their habits of abstract, less interpersonal moral reasoning. We can all probably adduce some anecdotal evidence in support of such a view.

If women are more in touch with their feelings, it is perhaps natural to think that they may be more likely to think in relational and empathetic terms. In light of the vital importance morality attaches to imaginatively and empathetically putting yourself into the shoes of others and seeing from their perspective, as Rorty exhorts, it makes sense that those more in touch with their feelings and sentiments would be the more proficient at the moral task. But is there much evidence and research to back up such an explanation?

Not according to Lawrence Walker of the University of British Columbia, who has reviewed 80 studies on gender difference in solving moral dilemmas and determines that “[s]ex differences in moral reasoning in late adolescence and youth are rare.”¹⁸ Additionally, three researchers

17. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, in *The Signature Classics*, p. 677.

18. Lawrence J. Walker, “Sex Differences in the Development of Moral Reasoning: A Critical Review,” *Child Development* 55 (1984): 681.

at Oberlin College attempted to test Gilligan's hypothesis, administering a moral reasoning test to one hundred male and female students. Their conclusion: "There were no reliable sex differences [. . .] in the directions predicted by Gilligan."¹⁹ Other findings by Wendy Wood, a specialist in women's psychology at Texas A&M, William Damon (Brown University), and Anne Colby (Radcliffe College) further undermine these negative stereotypes.²⁰

Talk of masculinity as essentially predatory, ultra-competitive, or lacking in empathy can be harmful to boys. As Christina Hoff Sommers has chronicled, ample evidence suggests that boys are already lagging behind educationally and socially in our society in several ways, from delinquency rates to diagnoses of ADD, to plummeting percentages of boys attending college.²¹ The message that masculinity *per se* is largely the culprit removes the focus from where it needs to be: healthy homes, moral training, better education, good role models, for example.

Empathy is a human trait, presumably, not merely a feminine one, and to insist otherwise plays into the old stereotypes. Men are no less capable of empathy than women are of analytical and logical reasoning, even if nobody, male or female, is as moral as they ought to be. We err when we exaggerate the differences between the sexes, resorting to rhetoric increasingly polarizing and divisive, tendentious and demeaning.

Men's and women's voices may well differ, but their common humanity is more important than their differences. Lewis concludes the passage cited above like this: "It is arrogance in us [men] to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry 'masculine' when we see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them [women] to describe a man's sensitivities or tact or tenderness as 'feminine'."²² As Solzhenitsyn once wrote, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Sexualizing the moral dichotomy is a mistake, needlessly driving men and women into respective corners and the contentious stance of adversaries.

19. William Friedman, Amy Robinson, and Britt Friedman, "Sex Differences in Moral Judgments? A Test of Gilligan's Theory," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11 (1987): 37–46.

20. Anne Colby and William Damon, "Listening to a Different Voice: A Review of Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (October 1983), p. 475.

21. Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War against Boys* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

22. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 677.

Now let's consider a second and more serious feminist challenge: reducing the moral demand by rejecting some of the universalist and impartiality constraints in Kantian ethics. In Kant's ethical theory, a person is to follow the categorical imperative, which, on one formulation, tells us to act only on those principles we can will to become universal laws. And the principles, or maxims, on which we are to act are to be expressible in universal terms, singular reference having been excised. On this score, though, Kant departed from a number of other important ethical thinkers. Aristotle, for example, thought that moral judgments are always made within the context of family or *polis*. Kant's insistence that such particular terms be replaced with universal ones is an interesting claim, but one that leaves many dubious.

Gilligan, mentioned above, argues that moral judgments must often be specific, whereas the universalist requires them to be general. She rejects Kohlberg's famous depiction of the highest stage of ethical development as requiring self-chosen ethical principles weighed abstractly, arguing instead for "care thinking" in which rival claims are weighed in the particular. This is to give ethical questions their due within their *contextual particularity*. Nell Noddings extends the point, going as far as to say that the ethic of caring "will not embody a set of universalizable moral judgments."²³

Hare, however, replies by distinguishing between the general and specific, on the one hand, and between the universal and particular, on the other. A principle can be universal, shorn of singular reference, but still described in minute and completely specifiable detail. There can also be general particular statements, like the claim that all Americans are morally good. Hare writes:

Now contextual particularity, as Gilligan and Noddings describe it, seems to be a matter of specificity, of detail. . . . But a maxim can be universal and yet concrete, in the sense of mentioning (in universal terms) anything that distinguishes this situation from any other. . . . there is, then, a valid point against any account of the moral demand which fails to acknowledge the need for sensitive moral perception of the relevant details in particular situations.²⁴

23. Nell Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 28.

24. Hare, *Moral Gap*, pp. 145–146.

Hare suggests that we do not yet have a valid objection against universalism, at least on his reading of Kant.

Other feminist objections Hare answers come from Michele Dumont, Margaret Walker, and Lynne McFall.²⁵ In each case, he argues there are resources in the corpus of Kant's work itself to defend universalism. Having defended the high moral demand of universalism, Hare, interestingly enough, then argues that not all moral judgments are universalizable. He thinks that there are some moral judgments from which singular terms can't be eliminated, and he calls these *particular moral judgments*. They contain at least an element that's universalizable, but not every term in particular moral judgments is universalizable; he disagrees with Kant's assessment that this renders them nonmoral. Hare notes that, on this score, it is Kant who stands apart from the Jewish, Christian, and Greek ethical traditions that often emphasized particularity. Hare also thinks particular moral judgments give appropriate pride of place to showing regard

25. Another objection to universal ethics from care ethicists is that care must be particularized, as Michele Dumont puts it, must be "a response to what a particular person actually needs or wants or what will serve a particular relationship. From the care perspective people are perceived as having access to others *in their own terms*." But there is nothing in Kantian universalism that necessarily precludes consideration of the perspectives of those affected by our actions. Indeed, for Kant, to treat another person as an end requires treating her as the author of universal law. As far as it's possible, in fact, we are to share the ends of the other persons affected by our actions. We may well, Hare admits, fail to care as deeply as we should about others, but this is no fault of universalism; we are failing by the universalist standard itself on such occasions. Recall, though, that falling short of the moral demand, at best only approximating it to some limited extent, is often to be expected. Margaret Walker raises a third objection to universalist ethics by suggesting that different people have different views about what is morally most important. She takes such particulars to be discretionary, in the sense that people can arrive at different conclusions about what they ought to do in a particular circumstance, and properly so. By way of reply, though, Hare notes how she, while affirming such discretion, refers to "generally acceptable orderings of generic value," indicating that she thinks discretion operates within certain limits. But then we are left with a theory of moral permissions that apply to everybody, and an area within these permissions that is discretionary; but such a picture is consistent with universalism. Kant himself distinguished between perfect and imperfect duties on the grounds that imperfect duties can be fulfilled in a number of different morally permissible ways. Hare doesn't deny that many illegitimately foist their own discretionary personal ideals on others as morally necessary, but this is no necessary part of universalism as he construes it, or as he thinks Kant construed it. A fourth objection comes from Lynne McFall, who says that impartiality is incompatible with friendship and love. Friendship requires, she says, unconditional commitments, and these are identity-conferring and reason-giving. But such commitments, except to impartiality itself, are inconsistent with impartiality. Hare, not surprisingly, disagrees, noting that Kant himself observed in *The Doctrine of Virtue* that it is no violation of impartiality to spend more time with the people we care about, or to look after them in circumstances or in ways in which we would not look after others.

to people for their own sake—the sort of import assigned by some, like Korsgaard, to Kant's admonition to treat people as ends in themselves. And because the term in the action position of particular moral judgments is universalizable, Hare argues that we can talk of particular moral judgments giving reasons for action. Not all judgments with universalizable terms in the action position are particular moral judgments in Hare's sense; only those count as moral that express care or regard for another person for his or her own sake.

To borrow Hare's example: Suppose a feminist mother is torn between caring for her daughter and helping in a worthy cause. She may not be able, on reflection, to adduce enough evidence to show that staying with her daughter is morally preferable, but she still feels its draw and thinks there's reason for doing so, but not a universalizable rationale. A challenge here for her is that there does not seem to be neutral ground from which to evaluate the two ways of looking at the moral situation. Nevertheless, Hare thinks she would be within her moral rights to care for her daughter, and that the decision deserves to be called moral because it preserves the typically moral character of caring for another person for her own sake. Saying she is staying with her daughter because she's her daughter, as Hare notes, doesn't quite capture what's happening; yes, it's true *causally*, he says, but it isn't the *phenomenology* of the matter. She's doing it for the daughter's *own sake*, whether or not everything about it can be universalized. Most importantly, Hare thinks such a category of moral judgments does not lower the moral demand.

What *would* lower the moral demand, he thinks, is the sort of "extreme particularism" of one like Noddings, who goes so far to say that she bears no responsibility to feed starving children in Africa. Duties, she insists, come about only in the close context of caring. But this indeed does seem wrong. Owing to technological advances, we know about innumerable global needs. If there's a tsunami in Japan, we can watch it in real time; if there are suffering refugees in the Middle East, we can read tweets about them instantaneously. This makes it less permissible to be indifferent to the needs of strangers. Particular moral obligations don't vitiate more general ones, even if the general ones usually remain imperfect ones in Kant's sense.

Hare echoes the sentiment by stressing that the institution of morality we are familiar with includes fully universalizable obligations, and that the consequences of the disappearance of fully universalizable morality would be serious. He also points out that special relations, like those of friendship

and family, are liable to certain kinds of internal corruption from the lack of the sense of justice. Dividing up morality into “care” for the private and “justice” for the public damages both spheres; people within special relations also need, for each other’s sake, to treat each other impartially, justly, as human beings.

To give one example: Parents are supposed to make their children feel loved and special, no doubt, but parents also have to teach their children that disappointments are inevitable; that, though undeniably valuable, they are not more objectively valuable than others; that achievement requires work; and that failure requires ownership of responsibility. Hare explains the psychological challenges children face upon realizing they are not the guide of their parents’ moral compass: “It can be a startling lesson for a child who has been the apple of his mother’s eye to discover that his mother is not willing to put pressure on his teacher to get him into a team, or even to make a scene in the shop to get him the last remaining construction set of the kind he wants for Christmas.”²⁶ (Think Dudley Dursley.) Yet as most parents know, protecting fragile psyches from such hard truths to keep their kids from experiencing pain is to confer them permission to remain emotionally children, if not infantile.

Neglecting the responsibility to impart these truths, however sober, to their children is a recipe for disaster and perpetual adolescence. Rather than an expression of love, it’s to privilege the particular to the neglect of broader truths applicable to everyone; and that is an example of reducing the moral demand. One is implicated in an objectionable form of extreme partiality when her judgments fail to be qualified and regulated by universal truths. C. S. Lewis depicts this insight in a powerful scene from *The Great Divorce*, where a mother has so fixated on her son that her “love” becomes idolatrous, blinding her to the fullness of reality in which he exists. She would rather he lose paradise to be with her than to lose him. Such “inordinate love” is no love at all.

The bottom line is that there is something troubling about efforts to reduce the moral demand. Something about it seems objectionable at a deep intuitive level, but if the moral gap is not to be closed by reducing the moral demand or exaggerating our natural capacities to an unrealistic level, what other options are left for the naturalist? We need help to meet the demand, but God isn’t there to ask.

26. Hare, *Moral Gap*, p. 164.

What this sometimes leads to are secular efforts at substitution. Sam Harris has recently written a book on secular spirituality. Rather than worshiping God, some secularists say, we can and should reverence the cosmos itself, including the stars whose death made our life possible; rather than speak of hope for resurrection at a funeral, reminisce about the past and allow beauty to provide solace. Years after attending a secular funeral in a church, Jürgen Habermas reflected on how the modern age has failed to find a suitable replacement for a religious way of coping with the final rite of passage that brings life to a close. Interestingly, Habermas's essay, "An Awareness of What Is Missing," argues that much of religion's enduring appeal is its idea of a "moral whole," an idea he thinks the main monotheisms share with Greek philosophy.

At any rate, this leads to the last secular effort to close the moral gap: finding a substitute for divine assistance.

Secular Substitutes

The last set of efforts to answer the challenge of the moral gap tries neither to exaggerate human capacity nor to lower the moral demand, but rather to recognize the gap but then locate some non-theological substitute for God's assistance to close it. Hare discusses three such efforts, put forward by Donald Campbell, David Gauthier, and Alan Gibbard. We wish quickly to review Hare's discussion of just Gauthier.

David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement* is an elaborate argument that it is rational not merely to agree to be moral, but to comply subsequently with the agreement—to refrain from being a "free rider." There are goods that we can't provide for ourselves without cooperation, and we can justify participation in this cooperation as a means to those goods. Morality is then understood as a set of prescriptions for such participation, and not just instrumentally. Morality, in time, can come to take on value for us. Gauthier thinks we are all self-interested, but still we need to cooperate with one another. Morality is a beneficially coordinative practice where the conditions of the perfectly competitive market do not obtain. Thus a need for a social contract arises.

Hare thinks this account of morality fails. Morality, on Gauthier's view, presents itself to us in a way that it really is not. It does not present itself to us as justifying itself first instrumentally, as a means for the production of cooperative goods by those who do not have an interest in each other's

interests. We may come to care affectively for justice, but the object of concern initially is instrumental value, according to Gauthier. But morality does not present itself to us the way Gauthier's rational reconstruction presents it. Kant, Hare thinks, is closer to the truth. The structure of moral rationality is reversed. Practical reason does not start from the pure maximization of self-interest, and then choose to bring other people into affective ties and finally to value justice for its own sake. Rather, practical reason starts from a recognition of the self and others as under the law, an authoritative moral law. This is not a purely intellectual recognition, but a feeling of respect. Morality is not constructed, but recognized as the standard to which we are already called. Hare is harkening back, of course, to some of those key features of the language, logic, and phenomenology of morality we discussed earlier.

Hare goes on to give other reasons he concurs with the preponderance of literature on Gauthier's analysis that, though it has much to offer us, it does not get the job done. For example, one difficulty is this: Gauthier has to prove that it is rational (in his sense) to be a *constrained maximizer*, that is, to adopt the disposition to comply only with fair bargains. But whether a bargain is worth pursuing depends on our bargaining advantage in the state of nature and on how many other constrained maximizers we can tell there are. Hare concludes that "Gauthier's theoretical machinery does not seem adequate to carry out the task he wants it to do."²⁷

What Is at Stake

It is worth pausing to consider what is at stake in this chapter. A famous line from Malcolm Muggeridge says the depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact. This line is an appropriate reminder at this juncture of the dialectic, because readers, especially those unsympathetic with this chapter's guiding thesis, may wish to register a complaint. They may want to insist that they, or at least some of their ilk, are plenty moral already, no ethically worse than the preponderance of men, no thanks to God, and they feel not the slightest compulsion toward neurotic perfectionism.

The point of this chapter has been to argue that an element of moral phenomenology would suggest a different narrative that rings true; that

27. Ibid., p. 181.

all of us, when we are brutally honest with ourselves, will find a ready crop of regrets within our breast, all manner of reasons to feel guilty for wrongs committed and goods neglected, inordinate self-consumption and predilections to self-aggrandizement. None of us is anywhere near morally perfect, yet morality, richly understood, seems to demand of us nothing less, or at the least a great deal more than we usually give. This makes us all moral only to some finite extent, and immoral to some real extent.²⁸ We are all works in progress. Of course, it is the prerogative of readers to deny either that they have any significant sense of their own moral imperfections or character flaws, or, even if they do, deny that it's reflective of anything important. We admit they have the mental space for such claims; nonetheless, our perspective is different, and we are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that there is something evidentially significant about this phenomenon.

George Santayana thought there was no hope of heaven to sweeten our few tears, "few" because our short lives are a fleeting incident to the indifferent universe as a whole, the merest "fragment of a fragment." Perfection, he believed, was out of reach, but still he believed in a "comic vision." Rejecting anything transcendent, he defined the "spiritual" not in post-mortem terms, but rather as an aesthetic exploration of the imagination. We should strive to live our lives festively, and our imaginations should operate with a sense of our finitude and impotence. In the light of these limitations, we should have a comic vision of reality, which celebrates the passing joys and victories in the world and admits that the tie that binds us is our very powerlessness and mortality.

With a sort of bravado he counseled that we embrace the fact that we are beaten and deceived, and yet—and this is what's most relevant for present purposes—be happier for it. Reveling in our collective helplessness, he exhorted the love of life in the consciousness of our impotence. Appreciating beauty and the feelings art invokes was his way to hold onto the category of perfection, a category otherwise irremediably lost. Art shows that it is not beyond our ken to experience varieties of "finite perfection," yet without God. We are made happier by empathizing with fictional characters in dire or unhappy contexts; artists help make suffering endurable; tragic characters delight people by letting them identify with

28. That the issue is more reflective of such a moral continuum or spectrum than a binary or bivalent picture ("either you're moral or you're not") is a reminder that none of us has morally "arrived."

images of perfection they approach but miss; imperfection has value as “incipient perfection.” This was Santayana’s secular substitute for “overcoming death’s sting,” his effort at reconciliation to the perennial fissure between truth, goodness, and beauty, without hope of their ultimate rapprochement.

In “A Free Man’s Worship,” Bertrand Russell follows a similar path, exalting human life on the foundation of moral despair by endowing it with the beauty of tragedy. As Linda Zagzebski writes, Russell “thought the right attitude toward the moral history of the universe is complete resignation, but the morally sensitive person with sufficient imagination can find all the motivation he needs to live a morally worthy life in the purely aesthetic qualities of such a life, and in this there is a kind of freedom.”²⁹ Santayana actually criticized Russell’s early commitment to morality as a failure to recognize some of the deep moral implications of naturalism, eventually convincing Russell to leave his sanguine moral confidence behind.

At any rate, what to Santayana and Russell qualified as heroic seems instead to be a sober concession of defeat. At least this much remains certain. If this life is all there is, no aspiration to moral perfection will ever be achieved. Once all the noonday brightness of human genius gets extinguished, and we by turns valiantly rage against the dying of the light, the close of day will come, and with it the termination of any and all efforts at moral growth. The process of moral maturation, even in the best of us, typically comes up rather short, and if this world is the only one there is, striving for complete moral maturity, individual or collective, is futile. Holiness in Kant’s sense remains forever elusive and beyond our grasp. Hope for it is irrational, Pollyannaish, patently unrealistic. If we despair of discharging our duties, how much ever more short do we fall of a life of perfect love? At best what we see in most persons is incremental moral improvement through dint of effort and a few humble acquired virtues along the way.

This is no disparagement of naturalism; it is just one of its latent tenets, one of its invariable implications and sober truths. The result is an inevitable and irremediable moral gap, a chasm impossible to cross, between what we can realistically aspire to be and what morality requires.

29. Linda Zagzebski, “Does Ethics Need God?” *Faith and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (July 1987): 300–301.

The naturalist lacks the resources to exercise the first part of Kantian moral faith. A life of complete virtue is, for all of us, a pipe dream, elusive, and inaccessible. Symptoms can be dealt with and managed, deleterious effects of the malady somewhat held in check, but the chronic disease rages on, never to be completely healed.

Moral Despair, the Inadequacy of Humean Skepticism, and Principled Moral Faith

We wish to extend the argument of this chapter now by facing some of the challenges posed by our rather obvious failure as human beings to make radical moral improvement, individually or collectively, with the resources of our own powers and abilities alone. It is a commonplace in ethics to ask, “Why be moral?” A good answer to such a question is that morality is its own reward, that understanding its import is enough to answer the question. But, as Linda Zagzebski points out, there is another question in the vicinity that is not so easily answered, and it is this: Should I try to be moral?

Why is this question different? Because, in short, it doesn’t make sense to attempt something one can’t do. If we are relegated to depend on our moral powers and capacities alone, our moral effectiveness seems to be in serious jeopardy, invariably, thus rendering the whole enterprise of morality, in an important sense, futile.

Ethics is often dubbed “practical rationality,” reminding us that it is, by its nature, a practical discipline, and therefore distinct from a number of other academic disciplines or branches of philosophy. The purpose of morality and moral studies is, as Zagzebski puts it, “to produce good and to prevent evil and to make oneself into a virtuous person.”³⁰ In her estimation, and in ours, in producing good and avoiding evil we are primarily aiming at something independent of ourselves, not unlike art.

Art aims at creations of beauty, while morality at creations of good. Both can be said to have intrinsic value, but a legitimate question to ask is what the point is of someone trying to become a great artist if he simply lacks the talent for it? If the writing is on the proverbial wall and the futility of a person’s effort to be a great artist is patently clear, there may well

³⁰ Ibid., p. 295.

be no point to the person pursuing such a dream if his efforts are bound to be ineffectual—and this is true even if art is worthy of pursuit in itself.

Likewise with ethics. Again, there are two questions here: First: Why be moral? Because it is worthwhile in itself; fair enough. But secondly, should I try to be moral? Knowing that it is worthwhile is not sufficient to provide a rational motivation for attempting it, without some reasonable assurance that the chances of success are not too remote, Zagzebski argues.

She identifies three ways in which we need moral *confidence* (a neighbor to Kantian moral faith), particularly in light of the sometimes costly nature of doing the moral thing: (1) we need confidence that we can have moral knowledge—good reasons that our individual moral judgments, both about obligations and values, are correct; (2) we need confidence in our moral efficacy, both in the sense that we can overcome moral weakness, and in the sense that we have the causal power to bring about good in the world; and (3) in so far as many moral goals require cooperation, we need confidence in the moral knowledge and moral efficacy of other people.

Unfortunately, she also thinks that deep skepticism is warranted in each of these three areas if all we have to go on morally is our own moral intuitions and reasoning and the intuitions and reasoning of others. But such resulting moral despair, she assumes, cannot be rational, so she concludes that we must be able to rely on more than our own human powers and those of others in attempting to live a moral life. Most relevant to this chapter is what she has to say about the second item listed above: doubts about our moral efficacy.

We have already highlighted deficiencies in our moral efficacy, but now what we wish to emphasize is the problematic nature of the skepticism in question, because, without an adequate solution, it makes it a pressing question whether or not we should try to be moral.

Now, one might try to avoid moral despair in the face of various skepticisms by embracing a more benign form of skepticism, such as that of David Hume. Hume's skepticism—about the existence of enduring objects, an enduring self, causation as more than constant conjunctions of causes and effects, the reliability of induction, and the like—exerts no practical effect on the way one lives one's life, nor even on one's tendency to acquire and keep beliefs. When Hume said various beliefs and practices are not rationally justified or rationally grounded, his subsequent counsel was not that we abandon such beliefs or put a stop to such practices. One among other reasons he refrains from giving such advice is that it is

altogether impracticable; he thought we can't help but retain such beliefs as our moral ones. So whatever the implications of his skepticism may turn out to be, they don't affect common practice and conviction. Such kinder, gentler skepticism thus doesn't carry much practical purchase or impede our various folk beliefs, and this renders it largely harmless since it is inconsequential in terms of cash value. We continue making inductive inferences and assuming that physical objects endure and that the world is more than five minutes old, even as we can't prove such things noncircularly and may harbor Humean skepticism.

Might Zagzebski's varieties of moral skepticism be reducible to such innocuous skepticism? Let's approach this question by taking a quick foray into this matter of Humean skepticism via Kripke and Wittgenstein. Kripke's solution to the "Kripkensteinian" problem of *plus versus quus* follows the path of Humean skepticism. For Hume, a *straight* solution dissolves the paradox by rejecting one of more of the premises leading to it, whereas *skeptical* solutions accept the truth of the paradox but argue that it fails to undermine our ordinary beliefs and practices. Kripke thought Wittgenstein himself endorsed a skeptical solution to the challenge to meaning posed by his private language argument, and Kripke offers one of his own (to the challenge as it struck Kripke: the *plus/quus* paradox). The challenge, in a nutshell, is that all of the various "rules" by which we grasp meaning are susceptible to *quus*-like challenges that entail that what is meant by various natural language expressions could be anything at all. This obviously doesn't bode well for meaning! A skeptical solution, though, salvages the day by denying that the absence of "deeper," more metaphysically grounded meanings leads to our having to give up meaning altogether.

Sometimes ethicists, despairing of deeper meanings or ultimate grounding for various ethical claims, similarly deny that this is problematic. Horgan and Timmons, for example, argue that there are no semantic facts ("FACTS," as they put it), so there's no need for such facts to be objectively, determinately grounded in non-semantic facts. This obviously could lead to deep moral skepticism, but they opt for a Humean solution. By casting the skepticism in Humean terms, their favored way to spell out moral semantics (and meta-semantics) is a natural implementation of Kripke's skeptical strategy for addressing the problem of *plus/quus*. Their skepticism need not have large practical implications, they insist. Membership in a speech community and participating in its linguistic stance is sufficient to make objective moral meaning and normativity possible, on their

view. This “norm-accepting stance makes for stance-internal, determinate, semantic facts even in the absence of objective, in-the-world, semantic FACTS. Thus, Kripke’s arguments against the viability of any straight solution to the Kripkenstein problem provide support for the position we have advocated here.”³¹

As naturalists, Horgan and Timmons think the best they can do in the absence of any moral truth or meaning makers external to particular linguistic communities is to speak of “correct assertability” (which they take to be a step beyond mere *warranted assertability*, mentioned in our discussion of pragmatism in Chapter 1). Correct assertability is a matter of community linguistic behavior understood as normative. Applied to the semantics of morality, such “contextualist semantics” should, in their view, allay fears that the lack of deeper moral meanings or more ultimate ontological foundations undermines our ordinary moral language, beliefs, and practice. This is close to the view some have that, whatever the shape of one’s metaethics—even if it comes out entirely anti-realist—one’s normative practices can escape unscathed (a claim about which we remain skeptical). This, at any rate, is Horgan and Timmons’ effort to blunt the force of moral skepticism, not by solving it in any straight way, but by granting that its source remains but that it can be toned down to innocuous Humean skepticism that does not have disquieting practical effects.

In a similar way, then, can the skepticism to which Zagzebski points be reduced in this fashion? The pressing underlying question is whether morality constitutes an arena in which it is proper to accept a Humean skeptical solution. The skeptical challenge about our moral weakness and failure, recall, raises the serious question of whether one should try to be moral while knowing full well ahead of time the inevitable futility of the effort—again, if more than minimal improvement is the goal, as the moral demand dictates. Can the force of such skepticism be cast as merely Humean and thereby defanged?

It would seem that this possibility obtains only if certain Humean strictures are satisfied. For example, recall that one of the features of taking this route was that the beliefs and practices in question were impracticable to give up—the way we invariably keep assuming we’re not brains in vats, for example, though we can’t prove it. If such impracticability is a necessary

³¹ Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Metaphysical Naturalism, Semantic Normativity, and Meta-Semantic Irrealism,” *Philosophical Issues* 4 (1993): 202.

condition in need of satisfaction before a proper application of a skeptical solution to the paradox in question, then morality clearly does not qualify. Moral beliefs and practices, arguably unlike (or at least relevantly different from) other codified patterns of human behavior, most assuredly *can* be abandoned, and in certain circles surely *are*. They are not inevitable, as is powerfully attested to by the whole movement among secularists toward nihilism we have deferred discussing until later. Indeed, in the face of stiff challenges moral realism faces from such thinkers, moral beliefs and practices are in serious jeopardy. The impulse toward morality is strong, no doubt, but there remains moral space and ample prerogative for forms of the deepest moral skepticism. Thus, the absence of sufficient moral foundations—including an effective way to close the moral gap—poses a real threat to important moral conviction and praxis.

Zagzebski expresses the point this way:

We have a strong moral motivation to be moral, but unlike Humean doubt, moral beliefs are very vulnerable to the doubt I have described, and it is not true that we cannot help having them. Skepticism does not take away the natural desire to be moral, but it does take away the motivating force because morality is intimately connected with feelings, commitments, sacrifices, expectations, and hopes. The moral life involves risk, both because of the personal sacrifices it requires and because of the emotional commitment it involves. This makes it very vulnerable to skepticism; hence, the despair.³²

Zagzebski here echoes a point James made in the previous chapter: that morality is a multilayered thing, a rich composite of disparate elements, engaging the whole of our beings in various ways, and demanding more of us than cerebral admiration or passive recognition. It stirs and calls us, beckons and invites us, challenges and convicts us. And perhaps for just such reasons, allegiance to it remains tenuous, subject to skepticism. It offers us alternative possibilities, and thus, for those so inclined, a chance to deny its truth for lack of empirical enough evidence, or resist its dictates found too demanding, or refuse to retain an open, warm, giving heart for fear of what susceptibilities it might incur. Moral truth isn't just there to be deciphered and dissected and logic chopped, but to love; and

32. Zagzebski, "Does Ethics Need God?", 288–289.

morality invites our active participation and wholehearted commitment. It provides illumination that draws us, but doesn't coerce us. Prior choices affect future ones, moreover, as our moral volitions put us on trajectories and form habits and characters; hardened hearts and seared consciences remain eminent possibilities. The whole moral enterprise is a complicated phenomenon, involving dynamic psychological processes, and related in complex ways to both our cognition and emotions. Closing our eyes to the light is possible.

In view of these considerations, it is our judgment that principled reasons are necessary if moral beliefs and practice are successfully to evade the force of moral skepticism. Sturdy foundations need to ground the enterprise, resources, and realities to which our language and minds have access. More than the mere linguistic practices of our particular communities must undergird morality, and more than skeptical solutions must be on offer to answer moral skepticism. In light of our weakness of will, and need for radical moral transformation, in order to become not merely better men, but new men, something beyond the resources of secularism alone is required to make our efforts at perseverance rational, knowing as we do in advance, all too well, our predilections and penchants for moral failure.

Once more, we need moral faith to steer a middle course in between two less rational options: secular rejection of moral belief, on the one hand, and secular moral fideism, on the other, which, laudably, tries to hold on to the project of morality in the face of real skeptical challenges, but mistakenly does so by making a blind jump, treating strong ontological foundations as eliminable at best, their loss as somehow intellectually virtuous at worst. Moral faith, like any justified faith, is not mere wishful thinking or a leap in the dark, nor an insistence on false certainties, but rather, rightly construed, principled, evidenced, and rational.

This chapter has dealt with the first dimension of Kantian moral faith: the need to believe that radical moral transformation is possible, which speaks to the rationality of a commitment to the enterprise of morality, especially in the face of rational challenges to it. Now we turn to the second aspect of moral faith: the convergence of happiness and virtue.

Moral Rationality

*The philosophers, indeed, shewed the beauty of virtue;
they set her off so as drew men's eyes and
approbation to her;
but leaving her unendowed, very few were willing
to espouse her.*

*The generality could not refuse her their esteem
and commendation,
but still turned their backs on her, and forsook her,
as a match not for their turn.¹*

JOHN LOCKE

JOSS WHEDON'S *CABIN in the Woods* is anything but a standard thriller. In fact it subverts nearly every typical motif such movies tend to showcase, but more importantly, by the movie's end, the viewer realizes that the whole premise is based on a particular view of reality—a mammoth counterfactual, at least we hope. The world inhabited by the characters and depicted on the screen is one in which ultimate reality, the realm of the divine, features gods of the most monstrous variety. Only pacifying such hideous deities with yearly sacrifices can prevent them from unleashing their destructive power on an unsuspecting world.

Reality, as depicted in this film, is not a world guided by loving providence and a good God, but is rather a world in which the ultimate truth is hideous, rather than beautiful and good. And this raises a most serious question: Is such a world worth saving at all? Whether or not morality is part of ultimate reality raises the deeply sobering question of whether or not it's fully rational to be committed to morality come what may. If

1. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 70.

ultimate reality is not thus committed, then the moral life, at least on many occasions, may not make sense in the final analysis. This is the topic of this chapter: the convergence of happiness and virtue, the second dimension of Kantian moral faith, the last central moral fact in need of explanation.

The most famous and influential Christian book of the twentieth century is based on the conviction that morality is indeed fundamental to ultimate reality. We refer, of course, to C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, a book of apologetics that grew out of a series of radio talks he gave, beginning in 1941. Lewis began that book with a moral argument for the existence of God, as we've seen, building his case by first getting his readers to agree that there is an objective moral law, a standard of right and wrong that we did not create, that is just as real as the physical world and the laws of nature. He then goes on to ask what lies behind the law, and argues that the reality of the moral law points to the existence of God as its best explanation.

Right around the same time, in 1943, Lewis gave the Riddell Memorial Lectures at the University of Durham, and again he made the case for objective moral truth, lectures published in a book that is less famous, but arguably more philosophically interesting, namely, *The Abolition of Man*. Now what is particularly interesting for our purposes is that Lewis did not in that book advance a moral argument for the existence of God. In fact, he explicitly denied that was his intention. There he relied only on philosophical arguments that do not invoke theism.

We Must Bow to the Tao

The heart of Lewis's argument hinges on the claim that objective moral truth, which he calls the *Tao*, is axiomatic and that we cannot prove it any more than we can prove the axioms of geometry. We can see that it is true, just as we can see the truth of geometrical axioms. Thus, in the appendix to the book, he lists examples of the *Tao* from a wide range of sources, historically and geographically, aiming to show that it qualifies as universal—from the Law of General Beneficence (both negative and positive), to the Law of Special Beneficence, the Law of Justice, the Law of Magnanimity, and the like. His aim here, he emphasizes, is only to *illustrate* the *Tao*, not to *argue* for it. He writes, “I am not trying to *prove* its validity by the argument from common consent. Its validity cannot be

deduced. For those who do not perceive its rationality, even universal consent could not prove it.”²

We want to assess Lewis’s argument for objective morality, particularly to determine whether he makes a convincing case that it is fully rational to be committed to it. We will do so by examining two clear statements of his argument. Here is the first.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I may add that though I myself am a theist, and indeed a Christian, I am not here attempting any indirect argument for theism. I am simply arguing that if we are to have values at all we must accept the platitudes of Practical Reason as having absolute validity: that any attempt, having become skeptical about these, to reintroduce value lower down on some supposedly more “realistic” basis, is doomed. Whether this position implies a supernatural origin for the *Tao* is a question I am not here concerned with.³

The heart of this argument is obviously a straightforward conditional: If we are to have values at all, we must accept the platitudes of Practical Reason as having absolute validity.

Lewis was clearly confident that his readers would affirm the antecedent of this statement, but he was aware that some would try to deny the conditional as a whole by denying the consequent. Lewis addressed those who were skeptical about the consequent by arguing that attempts to find a more “realistic” basis for value at some more fundamental level were certain to fail.

Let us explore his case for this claim because it is crucial for his overall argument. Lewis does so by focusing on a particular component of the *Tao* that had pressing relevance, indeed urgency in 1943, namely, the traditional view that it is an admirable thing to die for one’s country. In his first lecture, Lewis invokes the classical legacy of this conviction by noting that when “a Roman father told his son that it was a sweet and seemly thing to die for his country, he believed what he said.”⁴ This was not merely a piece

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, in *The Complete Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 731.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 716.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 702–703.

of patriotic propaganda, but a matter of deep and sincere conviction, one that would be readily recognized and affirmed by anyone who perceived the axiomatic truth of the *Tao*. The father was not simply trying to “condition” his son to share this attitude for pragmatic purposes, but rather was initiating his son into a noble tradition, one he fully owned and completely respected.

The question Lewis presses against his critics who doubt the axiomatic authority of the *Tao* is how they propose to persuade young men that they should be willing to die for their country (that was in the midst of a world war against Nazism). But for Lewis, this example is not relevant merely because it was of urgent practical concern at that moment of time, but because it is telling at a deeper and more fundamental level. In his second lecture, he noted this as follows:

Let us continue to use the previous example—that of death for a good cause—not, of course, because virtue is the only value or martyrdom the only virtue, but because this is the *experimentum crucis* which shows different systems of thought in the clearest light.⁵

So the point is that the issue of death for a good cause is the crucial experiment, the decisive test case for a system of thought. In particular, can a system of thought make rational sense of why death for a good cause is a “sweet and seemly” thing?

It is worth noting that, in this context, Lewis has not made much mention of obligation. Beyond asking why death for a good cause is a “sweet and seemly thing,” whatever that exactly amounts to, we might ask whether such a sacrifice is dutiful. But the question remains whether Lewis himself was broaching the question of duty here or whether he was referring only to something of value, namely, the supererogatory. Recall the distinction between the good and the right: axiological matters of value, on the one hand, and deontic matters of moral obligation, on the other. An action might go above and beyond the call of duty, but still be praiseworthy, something heroic, something in some sense good or virtuous, beautiful, “sweet and seemly,” but not a duty.

The notion of a duty is a specific idea, as we have discussed at length, carrying with it both binding authority and blameworthiness for failure

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 706–707.

to comply. At least generally speaking, duties carve out from among all the potential good acts one might perform the specific subset of those one would be blameworthy for failing to perform. Heroic actions are often seen as among those that go beyond duties, and while they are of great moral value, they remain morally optional rather than obligatory. So, is Lewis in fact exploring whether a system of thought makes rational sense of why death for a good cause is, in at least some cases, a moral duty?

Evidence can be cited that suggests that Lewis means to extend his point to include obligations. He notes that what is common to Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental conceptions of the moral life “is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind the universe is and the kind of things we are.” When we recognize such truths, we “recognize a quality which *demands* a certain response from us whether we make it or not.”⁶

A word like “demands” sounds strongly prescriptive, a locution of obligation or duty. At this stage of the dialectic, though, Lewis is not so much invoking the specter of moral obligations as he is pointing to the Augustinian notion of ordinate affections. Take an example from aesthetics that he uses. Seeing a particularly beautiful scene in nature may evoke feelings of the *sublime*. Quite contrary to subjectivists who might suggest that such an experience reveals nothing objectively true about the scene itself, but simply something subjective about the observer, Lewis is urging us to recognize that the feeling puts us in touch with something objectively worthy of such a feeling. Lewis stands in the tradition which holds that various sentiments of ours can on occasion put us in touch with deeper realities. When the process is working well, there is a fit between our affective responses and the objective reality. When we feel disgust at the mistreatment of another person, for example, Lewis would suggest the feeling evoked enables us to grasp the moral reality of the situation, in this case the wrongness of the mistreatment. We can use the language of “ought” to capture this phenomenon, but here it is good to remember Wittgenstein’s point about the fluidity and versatility of language. The point on display is less a matter of obligation than, one might say, the proper function of our rational faculties expansively construed (to include practical rationality). At this juncture, then, Lewis is not pushing the point about moral obligation very strongly.

6. Ibid., p. 701.

Lewis continues, “Let us suppose that an Innovator in values regards *dulce et decorum* and *greater love hath no man* as mere irrational sentiments which are to be stripped off in order that we may get down to the ‘realistic’ or ‘basic’ ground of this value. Where will he find such a ground?”⁷

Lewis examines a few ways death for a good cause might be supported without appealing to the *Tao*. First, Lewis notes, such a sacrifice might be commended on the utilitarian grounds of its obvious value to the larger community. The question this immediately raises, Lewis notes, is this: Why should some be singled out to die for the sake of others? On what grounds are these persons required to be willing to sacrifice their lives so that others may live?

This may come across as a selfish question to ask, reflective of the sort of rabid individualism many persons, rightfully in our estimation, inveigh against with vehemence. But asking whether a commitment to morality, an effort to live the moral life, serves one’s interests is altogether appropriate. If morality is a fully rational enterprise, it strains credulity to think that it is fundamentally at odds with one’s ultimate well-being.

At this point, Lewis recognizes that the moral Innovator who rejects the *Tao* may ask why “selfishness” is more “rational” than altruism. The Innovator, in other words, is intimating that pushing the question about self-interest is tantamount to selfishness, but there is a difference between selfishness and legitimate questions of self-interest. Asking whether adherence to morality is compatible with a fulfilling life is not enough to turn someone into an objectionable egoist or individualist. It’s a perfectly legitimate query.

Lewis welcomes the Innovator’s question, and replies that the answer depends on what one means by “rational.” If what one means here by “reason” is simply the process of inferring certain propositions from other propositions, “ultimately derived from sense data,” then “the answer must be that a refusal to sacrifice oneself is no more rational than a consent to do so. And no less rational. Neither choice is rational—or irrational—at all.”⁸ In other words, if our best sentiments are not veridical, and do not put us in touch with an objective set of moral values, and all we have recourse to is a narrow discursive process using the fodder of sense impressions, then neither the rationality nor irrationality of self-sacrifice can be shown.

7. Ibid., p. 707.

8. Ibid.

Why? Because, Lewis insists, following Hume, that it is impossible to derive an *ought* statement from an *is*. Practical conclusions cannot be deduced from factual propositions in his view. However, this does not mean that practical moral propositions are irrational. To the contrary, our understanding of Reason should be expanded to include Practical Reason, by which we perceive the axiomatic truth of the *Tao*. So recognizing the axiomatic truth of fundamental moral imperatives is hardly irrational; quite the contrary, it is “rationality itself” to recognize these moral truths as things so obviously reasonable that they neither demand nor admit proof.

Lewis recognizes that the Innovator is likely to find such a suggestion dubious, and “more likely to give up the quest for a ‘rational’ core and to hunt for some other ground even more ‘basic’ and ‘realistic.’”⁹ The Innovator, Lewis thinks, will probably look to Instinct. Perhaps here we can find a basis for affirming sacrificial death. Again Lewis is dubious of what we even mean by instinct, let alone whether there is an instinct to sacrifice one’s life for others. By “Instinct” Lewis himself means to refer to “an unreflective or spontaneous impulse widely felt by the members of a given species,” but in what way can Instinct help us find real values? It is not the case that we are causally or inevitably constrained to obey Instinct. Instincts, moreover, are often in conflict with each other, and when they are, how do we determine which of them to follow? So if the instinct for self-preservation is in conflict with the instinct to sacrifice oneself for others, how do we determine that the latter instinct should be indulged rather than the former? Any appeal to a so-called “higher” instinct, he alleges, conceals a value judgment that is not derived from instinct.

Another of Lewis’s objections to the appeal to instinct is particularly pertinent to our concerns. He notes that it might be suggested that following our instinct to sacrifice will lead us to happiness and satisfaction. His response to this is blunt.

But the very question we are considering was that of facing death which (so far as the Innovator knows) cuts off every possible satisfaction: and if we have an instinctive desire for the good of posterity then this desire, by the very nature of the case, can never be satisfied, since its aim is achieved, if at all, when we are dead.¹⁰

9. Ibid., p. 708.

10. Ibid., pp. 708–709.

The harsh reality of death puts an abrupt stop to any sort of satisfaction that might be gained from sacrifice for the person who makes it, so whatever happiness it produced would have to occur *before* the sacrificial death actually occurred. Death for a good cause, then, can hardly provide much happiness to those who choose such a death.

Again, the upshot of these arguments for Lewis is to show that there is no rational ground to defend death for a good cause beyond the axiomatic truth of the judgment that such a death is one of great value, and in some cases even a duty. “It looks very much as if the Innovator would have to say not that we must obey Instinct, nor that it will satisfy us to do so, but that we *ought* to obey it.”¹¹ It’s the Innovator, notice, who finally introduces the concept of moral obligation proper into this discussion. But Lewis is left skeptical that any such obligation can be established on the basis of instinct alone. Without assuming that our best sentiments reliably track truth, we have no principled reason to think that our instincts reveal moral demands. Instinct yields a particularly problematic cacophony of varied voices, rendering it all the more difficult to take as the definitive source of the moral law. “If we did not bring to the examination of our instincts a knowledge of their comparative dignity we could never learn it from them.”¹²

Now let us turn to one more of Lewis’s statements of his essential argument for this conclusion. This version of the argument occurs in the third lecture, where Lewis develops an interesting argument from which the title of his book comes. He asks us to imagine some day in the far off future when the science of eugenics has been perfected, and it will be possible for those with the relevant technology to modify human beings in whatever way they wish, including giving them whatever sort of conscience they wish. Assuming that these “conditioners” have stepped outside of the *Tao*, and do not consider it binding, how shall they decide what sort of artificial *Tao* to produce in the human race? Lewis contends that the most likely scenario is that the conditioners will simply act on their strongest felt desires. And this is what shall finally lead to “the abolition of man,” for the creatures he envisions will have forfeited their moral sensibilities that are essential to true humanity, and will have been reduced to natural artifacts.

11. Ibid., p. 709.

12. Ibid., p. 710.

With this chilling scenario in the background, Lewis offers us another argument for the absolute authority of the *Tao*.

Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own “natural” impulses. Only the *Tao* provides a common law of action which over-arch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.¹³

Here Lewis presents us with a dilemma: either we are “rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*” or we are mere nature, under the tyranny of natural impulses. So either way, we shall be ruled. It is a question of what sort of rule we shall have. Shall we freely submit to the rational rule of the *Tao*, or shall we be enslaved to the whims of natural impulse?

Again, Lewis is confident that his readers will recoil at the notion that we are mere nature, under the tyranny of natural impulse. This will lead them, he thinks, to embrace the alternative that the *Tao* has absolute authority and we must obey it or forfeit our very humanity.

Is the Tao Enough?

Lewis’s argument is certainly rhetorically bracing, and has considerable rational force as well. It is instructive, moreover, both in what it gets right, and also where some might try to push it, in directions that Lewis himself would likely reject. Arguably, however, some of his own words make his argument subject to such interpretations.

First, we completely agree that not all moral knowledge depends on theistic belief. We are inclined to agree that basic moral truth is self-evident to properly functioning human beings, like the axioms of geometry and fundamental laws of logic. This is an epistemic point, and as we have argued before, it is important not to confuse or conflate issues of moral epistemology with issues of moral ontology. We can agree that all normal human

13. Ibid., p. 727.

beings can know a lot of moral truth even if not all know the essential nature of morality or the ultimate reason it is true.

Insofar as Lewis is making an epistemic point, we agree with him. However, some could argue that he is doing more than that. Let us return to the conditional which is at the heart of his first argument.

If we are to have values at all, we must accept the platitudes of Practical Reason as having absolute validity.

We can begin simply by asking what Lewis means by “absolute validity.” Suppose a secular ethicist takes him to mean that we are obligated to follow the *Tao*, just because we can see that it is true. Moreover, this goes to show that no theistic foundation is necessary. Its authority is evident without any appeal to theism. This may remind readers of Wielenberg’s insistence that he has provided a secular account of ethics by suggesting that an act like *torturing a cat* simultaneously causes the instantiation of *something morally wrong*. We can affirm this is so, but to assume that this thereby provides a thoroughly secular account of the moral wrong in question is a mistake. The corpus of Lewis’s work reveals that he, too, would be skeptical that the self-evidence and felt authority of the *Tao* vindicates a secular worldview. He’s not currently arguing that the *Tao* can be easily accounted for in an atheistic world, or even that it can be explained equally well in an atheistic world as it can in a theistic world. He’s arguing instead for the reality of the moral law itself—that which is in need of explanation, but it’s not his present concern to provide the needed explanation.

So there are two issues here: the self-evident existence of the *Tao*, and its explanation. Suppose a secular ethicist, such as a Platonist, believes in the *Tao*, and we press the second question: what would explain its existence and binding authority? What is it about the *Tao* that obligates us to obey it? This question echoes a challenge Korsgaard poses against Platonism.

Here the secularist might try to use Lewis’s second argument to answer the question. If rejection of the *Tao* results in the abolition of man, that is a good reason to obey it, at least for all who value humanity. Still, the question may be pressed whether we are obligated to obey it for this reason. Do we have an obligation to prevent the abolition of man? Let us consider these questions in light of Lewis’s opening lines of his second lecture. There, he warns that any society that rejects the *Tao* and embraces ethical subjectivism in its educational institutions will inevitably be destroyed. He goes on, however, as follows, “But this is not necessarily a refutation

of subjectivism about values as a theory. The true doctrine might be a doctrine which if we accept we die. No one who speaks from within the *Tao* could reject it on that account.”¹⁴

Now this is a striking claim indeed. The true doctrine might lead to our death, but for those committed to obeying the *Tao*, that is no reason to reject it. The reason, presumably, is because we owe absolute allegiance to the true doctrine, even if it destroys us. If this is true, commitment to the *Tao* could have an equally bad or even worse result than giving it up. Suppose the choice were between giving up the *Tao* and the resulting abolition of man (the loss of our moral convictions and character), on the one hand, or simply death, on the other? Would we be obligated to choose to obey the *Tao* and embrace death? These questions expose the difficulties with the case that a “dogmatic belief in objective value” is sufficient to sustain that value without some further account of why objective moral truth claims make binding claims on us.

To get a sense of the difficulties, consider this lengthy quote from Nietzsche that at first glance sounds remarkably similar to the one we just quoted from Lewis:

No one will very easily hold a doctrine to be true merely because it makes us happy or virtuous, with the possible exception of those dear “idealists” who rhapsodize about goodness, truth, beauty, and let all sorts of eye catching, obvious, and good-natured wishful thoughts swim around together in their pond. Happiness and virtue cannot be used as arguments. But we like to forget, even the thoughtful spirits among us, that whatever makes us unhappy or evil can no longer be used as a counter-argument. Something might be true, even if it were also harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed it might be part of the essential nature of existence that to understand it completely would lead to our own destruction. The strength of a person’s spirit would then be measured by how much “truth” he could tolerate, or more precisely, to what extent he *needs* to have it diluted, disguised, sweetened, muted, falsified.¹⁵

14. Ibid., p. 705.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 37.

What is striking here, of course, is Nietzsche's claim that the truth might be harmful and even destructive to us if we understood it fully, but that is no argument against it. Indeed, the truth might not be beautiful and good, as "dear idealists" fondly wish it to be.

Here we see that Lewis's decision to defend objective morality without theism leaves him vulnerable to some obvious problems. In particular, without a providential God to ensure ultimate correspondence between happiness and virtue, a disconnect between them on occasion seems inevitable. Nietzsche of course was reconciled to that, and it is noteworthy that he was an example Lewis singled out of the moral "Innovator" whose views we can accept only if we are prepared to scrap the *Tao*.

What this shows is a surface similarity between the two on this point, but one that conceals a deeper disagreement: each seems to suggest, for different reasons, that the truth might be destructive to us but that this is no reason to reject it. Nietzsche said this because he thought there was no guarantee that reality itself features a marriage of truth, goodness, and beauty. Lewis suggested that, in principle, accepting the *Tao* might result in our death, but that we should accept it anyway. Lewis claimed his theism wasn't shaping his agenda here, but perhaps he was tacitly relying on his theism to distinguish his views so sharply from Nietzsche. Without God and an afterlife, if death is the end of the line, unconditional commitment to the *Tao* is not as obviously rational anymore. For such commitment to be rational, as we saw before, conforming one's life to the *Tao* shouldn't require sacrifice of one's ultimate self-interest. And even if self-sacrifice remains heroic, the question remains what could make it obligatory if it violates one's ultimate self-interest?

What if the Monsters Win?

Lewis here was not trying to argue for moral realism so much as show how reasonable it is to believe in it, and how unreasonable it is to disbelieve in it. He makes a number of interesting points along the way, many of which we resonate with. The first principles of morality are, in certain respects, foundational, basic, a preliminary to further argumentation, rather than conclusions of discursive inferences. They are likely analogous in important ways to axiomatic principles in theoretical reason by which we are able to reason at all. But we have seen a serious difficulty as well. If the claim is advanced that among the deliverances of the *Tao* is something like

an obligation for self-sacrifice, this claim becomes much harder to sustain if the question of whether this “implies a supernatural origin for the *Tao*” is altogether left to the side, as Lewis said he was doing.

Let us reflect more on Lewis’s “crucial experiment,” namely, death for a good cause. Has he made a convincing case that some persons may be morally obligated to sacrifice in this way? Granted, Roman fathers as well as patriots in other eras may sincerely believe in the value of such a death, and persuade their sons that it is a “sweet and seemly” thing to do. Granted such sacrificial deaths may be of great benefit to the larger community and be sincerely honored and viewed with deep gratitude by those who benefit from them. But is this sufficient to ground an obligation for anyone to die for their country? In the climactic scene of *Cabin in the Woods*, a character faces the choice to allow himself to be sacrificed to save the whole world—but he isn’t convinced, in light of ultimate reality, that the world’s worth saving, a world sustained only by appeasing monsters. Consistent with our abductive approach, the question we wish to ask is this: What worldview would best explain such a moral duty, especially in light of the rational constraint that morality and ultimate well-being need to cohere?

The underlying issue here is the relationship between morality and personal self-interest. In particular, can anyone have a moral obligation to act against their ultimate self-interest? Can morality make rational sense if it makes such demands? Now, of course, moral demands often require us to sacrifice our short-term self-interest for the sake of doing the right thing. But what about the case where we are required to sacrifice our ultimate, long-term self-interest for the sake of doing the right thing?

This seems to be the situation of the person who is called upon to sacrifice his life for a good cause. In sacrificing his life, he sacrifices every good that is to be had in this world, and on the assumption that this world contains the only goods there are, it seems he has acted against his ultimate self-interest.

Another way to get at this point is to ask whether a secularist’s view of the absolute authority of the *Tao* keeps truth aligned with goodness and beauty, or whether he has in fact fragmented them. Again, is his view here fundamentally different from Nietzsche’s, who insisted that the truth might not be beautiful and good, that to honestly understand it completely might lead to our destruction?

Surely Lewis would insist that the truth of the *Tao* is in fact good, both instrumentally and intrinsically. Moreover, obeying the *Tao* is necessary to prevent the destruction of society. But the question remains whether this

is enough to obligate individuals to be willing to sacrifice their lives. It may be good for humanity at large and the ongoing of human society, but is it good for *those particular individuals* who are called upon to sacrifice their lives? It does not appear that it is. Again, does it make rational sense that individuals could be morally obligated to sacrifice their ultimate well-being for the good of the human race as a whole or for the preservation of human society?

Let us probe this further by considering a fascinating essay on *Beowulf* by Lewis's colleague and friend J. R. R. Tolkien. In his analysis of this classic poem, Tolkien suggests that the author is situated between two worlds, namely, the world of primitive pagan heroism and the world of Christianity. The hero of the poem is almost, but not quite, a Christian knight. For what is celebrated in the poem is not heroism in the light of the Christian view of eternity and the ultimate defeat of evil, but, rather, the Northern ideal of unyielding will in the face of inevitable defeat. More specifically, in Northern mythology, man is depicted as allied with the gods against the monsters and the outer darkness. While it is a noble fight, to be sure, it is ultimately futile, for the monsters will win in the end. Tolkien explains the poet's perspective as follows:

Its author is still concerned with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. . . . The shadow of its despair, if only as a mood, as an intense emotion of regret, is still there. The worth of defeated valour in this world is deeply felt. As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say "culture" or "civilization") ends in night. . . . He could view from without, but still feel immediately and from within, the old dogma: despair of the event, combined with faith in the value of doomed resistance.¹⁶

Several pages later, Tolkien summarizes in a single sentence the profound difference between this noble, but despairing paganism and Christianity. What the poet of *Beowulf* saw clearly was simply this: "the wages of heroism is death."¹⁷

16. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 23

17. Ibid., p. 26.

The notion that goodness is destined to lose, that valor shall be defeated, that the final end of heroism is death, is a despairing one indeed, and it raises troubling questions about the authority of the *Tao*. While there is a certain tragic beauty in “defeated valour” and in keeping “faith in the value of doomed resistance,” it is still deeply disturbing to think that truth and goodness are so utterly at odds. Even the beauty here is a compromised beauty, for it arises from the tragedy of goodness that is crushed and destroyed.

So the question persists of whether sacrificial death could ever be a moral duty in a world where the forces of destruction prevail over valor and where resistance is finally futile and goes down in ultimate defeat. It is worth noting that Lewis shared Tolkien’s love for Northern mythology, and it is not unlikely that tales of doomed resistance helped to shape his view of the *Tao*. We can readily admit the tragic beauty of such valor and may profoundly admire it as a supreme act of supererogation. But what is far from clear is that such sacrifice can rise to the level of a moral duty in a world where the “wages of heroism is death.”

Sidgwick’s Dualism and His Disappointing Conclusion

This problem was explored with classic clarity and insight by Henry Sidgwick, the nineteenth-century English moral philosopher, whose book *The Methods of Ethics* is a landmark in the field that went through seven editions. His analysis is particularly telling for our concerns because he relied only on naturalistic resources for his moral theory. Sidgwick was a utilitarian who identified the “ultimate good” as “desirable consciousness” which is the essence of the happiness we naturally seek. And while he certainly recognizes rational self-love, or egoistic hedonism, as a legitimate moral motivation, he argues that the truly ultimate good must be something bigger, more secure and enduring. Here is what Sidgwick says will do the trick: “But Universal Happiness, desirable consciousness or feeling for the innumerable multitude of sentient beings, present and to come, seems an End that satisfies our imagination by its vastness, and satisfies our resolution by its comparative security.”¹⁸

18. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 404.

It is worth noting here that Sidgwick's description of Universal Happiness sounds almost divine. It is a "vast" reality that satisfies our imagination, as well as a secure one that satisfies our resolution. But the larger point we want to make is that he argues at length that universal happiness and individual happiness typically run in the same direction, and that acting to advance universal happiness is usually the exact thing we need to do to enjoy personal happiness as well. However, Sidgwick is realistic enough to recognize that there may be some exceptions to this general rule, and we may in some cases be forced to choose between personal happiness and universal happiness. Immediately after the passage quoted above, he went on to spell out the logic of this situation and what it means for practical reason.

It may, however, be said that if we require the individual to sacrifice his own happiness to the greater happiness of others on the ground that it is reasonable to do so, we really assign to the individual a different ultimate end from that which we lay down as the ultimate Good of the universe of sentient beings: since we direct him to take, as ultimate, Happiness for the Universe, but Conformity to Reason for himself.¹⁹

The oddity of this situation is that it creates a profound divide in the human race in its account of what is ultimately good that is hard to justify on rational moral grounds. For some, the ultimate good is happiness, for others it is conformity to reason.

Now Sidgwick goes on to acknowledge that it may be perfectly reasonable for one to sacrifice his individual good for the greater happiness of others, but at the same time it would be no less reasonable to take his own happiness as his ultimate end. It is precisely the conflict between these incompatible courses of action that generates what he called "the Dualism of Practical Reason."²⁰

Sidgwick goes on to observe that in Greek philosophy it was sometimes judged that it was good for the individual himself to act in a way that he himself recognized would be on the whole painful to him, for example, sacrificing a life filled with happiness by dying a painful death in response

19. *Ibid.*

20. Sidgwick says this in the footnote on p. 404.

to the call of duty. He explains this as due to certain confusions between what is reasonable to desire from the vantage point of personal existence and what is reasonable to desire from the vantage point of the larger community. Notably, however, he thinks this conviction also has a more telling source, for it is partly due "to a faith deeply rooted in the moral consciousness of mankind, that there cannot be really and ultimately any conflict between the two kinds of reasonableness."²¹

Now if there really is such a deeply rooted faith in our moral consciousness, it not only raises the question about what best explains and grounds this faith, but it also poses a truly profound problem if the conflict cannot be resolved.

Sidgwick returned to this problem in the last chapter of his book where he discussed the relations between the various methods of ethics that he had compared and assessed. There he stated with confidence that he had successfully shown that the alleged conflict between the intuitionist and utilitarian methods can be dissolved. Indeed, he affirms that self-evident moral principles of the sort intuitionists defend are required to provide a basis for a utilitarian system of ethics. Among the self-evident truths he cites is the principle of universal benevolence which holds that the happiness of all other persons is no less worthy of our pursuit than is our own happiness.

Sidgwick is aware of the difficulty of demonstrating the principle of universal benevolence to those who do not take it as self-evident, especially to egoists who take it as self-evident that they have the right to make their own happiness their primary pursuit. He does, however, offer a sort of "proof" to egoists who defend their view by contending that egoism is good from the point of view of the universe itself. That is, the egoist may claim nature has designed him to seek his own good. If he takes this line, Sidgwick argues, it can be pointed out that there is no principled reason his own happiness should be a more important part of the universal good than the happiness of any other individual person. For if nature has designed him to pursue his own happiness, then nature has designed the same for other persons as well. So his own principle may be used to support universal happiness as the ultimate good.²²

21. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 420-421.

The egoist might well reply that, yes, others too are designed to seek their own happiness, and they have a right to make this their primary goal. However, it does not follow that *I* am therefore obligated to pursue *their* happiness. In any case, Sidgwick recognized that egoists might not be persuaded by this proof, as is clear in the following:

Indeed, if an Egoist remains impervious to what we have called Proof, the only way of rationally inducing him to aim at the happiness of all, is to show him that his own greatest happiness can be best attained by so doing. And further, even if a man admits the self-evidence of the principle of Rational Benevolence, he may still hold that his own happiness is an end which is irrational to sacrifice to any other; and that therefore a harmony between the maxim of Prudence and the maxim of Rational Benevolence must be somehow demonstrated, if morality is to be made completely rational.²³

Sidgwick goes on to observe that in any tolerable society, the performance of moral duties towards others and the practice of the moral virtues will generally coincide with the long-run happiness of individual moral agents. He acknowledges, however, that there can be no sort of empirical proof that the coincidence is either universal or complete.

Indeed, the empirical evidence rather clearly shows that sometimes there is no such coincidence, even in “tolerable” societies, to say nothing of the many intolerable ones. This grim conclusion can be mitigated somewhat by reflecting on the value of sympathy for human happiness, and emphasizing that sacrifice is made on behalf of our fellow human persons, not merely some impersonal law. It is for persons like ourselves, who have desires and hopes like our own, that we make sacrifices out of a sense of moral duty. Recognizing this gives meaning to the sacrifices we make. Still, even allowing all this, Sidgwick admits that it is as certain as any conclusion can be that is arrived at by hedonistic comparison, that this would be insufficient to bring about a complete coincidence of utilitarian duty and self-interest.

For our purposes, it is most interesting that Sidgwick considers one solution to this problem that would entirely resolve it, but he rejects it, namely, a theistic solution. More specifically, he recognizes that, if God

23. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

exists, he could construct sanctions on a utilitarian basis that would “suffice to make it always every one’s interest to promote universal happiness to the best of his knowledge.”²⁴ His reason for rejecting this solution is that he was convinced that “ethical science can be constructed on an independent basis” and is not “forced to borrow a fundamental and indispensable premiss from Theology or some similar source.” In advancing this argument, he appealed to moral intuitions that he considered most certain. “I find that I undoubtedly seem to perceive, as clearly and certainly as I see any axiom in Arithmetic or Geometry, that it is ‘right’ and ‘reasonable’ for me to treat others as I should think that I myself ought to be treated under similar conditions, and to do what I believe to be ultimately conducive to universal Good or Happiness.”²⁵

By contrast, Sidgwick cannot discern any “inseparable” connection between these distinctly clear moral intuitions and the existence of a Supreme Being who will reward the fulfillment of duty and punish its violation. Indeed, he does not detect any intuition, theological or otherwise, guaranteeing such sanctions. In resigning himself to this unhappy result, his book concludes on a rather dismal note.

I feel indeed a desire, apparently inseparable from the moral sentiments, that this result may be realized not only in my own case but universally; but the mere existence of the desire would not go far to establish the probability of its fulfillment, considering the large proportion of human desires that experience shows to be doomed to disappointment. I also judge that in a certain sense this result *ought* to be realized: in this judgment, however, “ought” is not used in a strictly ethical meaning: it only expresses the vital need that our Practical Reason feels of proving or postulating this connexion of Virtue and self-interest, if it is to be made consistent with itself.²⁶

Sidgwick’s conclusion is that the deeply rooted desire for morality to coincide with self-interest is, unfortunately, one of our many desires “doomed to disappointment.” This is painful to have to absorb for anyone seeking a fully satisfying account of morality. A world where desires that are

24. *Ibid.*, p. 506.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 507.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 507–508.

“inseparable” from the moral sentiments are finally frustrated is a world that is, at least in some respects, deeply at odds with morality.

The disappointment here is not merely a matter of feeling. It involves a “vital need” that our practical reason feels for consistency with itself. By failing to achieve this consistency, the rationality of morality is deeply compromised, to say the least, as Sidgwick reluctantly recognized. While he insisted that we have no reason to abandon morality altogether even if we give up ever finding a solution to this difficulty, he did concede that “it would seem necessary to abandon the idea of rationalizing it completely.”²⁷

The Long, Dutiful Shadows of Kant

The solution that Sidgwick classically rejected, of course, is the solution Kant classically embraced to a similar sort of problem. In some ways, Kant and Sidgwick could not be more different. Whereas Sidgwick was a utilitarian who identified the ultimate good as universal happiness, more specifically defined as “desirable consciousness,” Kant is the epitome of deontological ethics. Whereas Sidgwick allowed the pursuit of personal happiness as a legitimate moral goal that could rationally take precedence over the good of the larger community in situations of conflict between the two, Kant sharply repudiated the pursuit of personal happiness as a moral objective. His aim was to ground morality in reason, and he rejected all principles rooted in desire as empirical in nature, rather than rational. Indeed, Kant not only equates the desire for personal happiness with the principle of self-love; he inveighs at length against allowing the desire for personal happiness to determine the will. For him the contrast between morality and self-love was not only sharp, but nonnegotiable. “The exact opposite of the principle of morality is [what results] when the principle of *one’s own* happiness is made the determining basis of the will.”²⁸

Still, for all his warnings against allowing the desire for happiness to compromise or destroy true moral motivation, for all his insistence that duty, and duty alone, can motivate morality, Kant recognizes that the desire for happiness is inextricably a part of the human condition.

27. Ibid., p. 508.

28. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 51.

To be happy is necessarily the longing of every rational but finite being and hence is an unavoidable determining basis of its power of desire. For [the being's] satisfaction with its own existence is by no means an original possession and a bliss, a bliss that would presuppose [in the being] a consciousness of its independent self-sufficiency. Rather, this satisfaction is a problem thrust upon the being by its finite nature itself; for the being is needy. . . .²⁹

The limitations of our human condition underscore the reality that we lack self-sufficiency, and that we are needy beings who lack the resources to secure the happiness we crave.

Kant's recognition of the essential contribution that happiness makes to the highest good, of course, is what generates his own problem, reminiscent of Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason. He noted that the concept of "highest" contains an ambiguity, since it can mean either "supreme" or "complete." And while he insisted that virtue, which makes us worthy to be happy, was the supreme good, he was emphatic that virtue alone is not sufficient to qualify as the complete highest good. The highest good that is complete consists of virtue along with corresponding happiness. While Kant admired the ancient Stoics for their high-minded emphasis on virtue, he chided them for tending to equate virtue with happiness by claiming that to be aware of one's virtue simply is happiness. For Kant, virtue by itself is not identical with happiness nor does consciousness of one's virtue entail happiness. However, virtue and happiness together constitute the highest good that is complete.

This definition of the highest good posed a challenge for Kant as we saw in a previous chapter. There we noted that Kant intensified the problem of evil (as compared to Hume) with his observation that there is no necessary connection between happiness and morality in our world. Moreover, no finite being who is dependent on the world has the power to establish this connection. This posed a problem for Kant, which he stated as follows.

Now since the furtherance of the highest good, the good which contains this connection in its concept, is an a priori necessary object of our will and is inseparably linked with the moral law, the impossibility of the highest good must prove the falsity of the moral law.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

If, therefore, the highest good is impossible according to practical rules, then the moral law which commands us to further this good must be fantastic and aimed at empty imaginary purposes, and hence in itself is false.³⁰

The very reality and truth of the moral law itself is at stake for Kant in whether or not the highest good for rational beings is possible to achieve. Certainly a rationally binding moral law cannot settle for less, so if the highest good cannot be achieved, the moral law is “aimed at empty imaginary purposes.”

Here is where Kant invoked God and immortality. His general strategy here emerges from this supposition: “But supposing that practical reason on its own had original a priori principles with which certain theoretical positions were inseparably linked but which nonetheless eluded all possible insight of speculative reason (although they must not contradict that insight) then the question is which interest is supreme.”³¹ Kant thought there was such an “inseparable” connection (contrast Sidgwick) between some a priori moral principles and “certain theoretical positions.” And while he emphasized that pure practical reason and theoretical reason are united as one reason since both judge by a priori principles, he also insisted that practical reason has primacy since all reason is ultimately practical.³² This leads Kant to affirm certain “expansions” of reason for practical purposes. While theoretical reason cannot itself establish these propositions, nevertheless, “as soon as these same propositions belong *inseparably to the practical interest* of pure reason, it must assume them—although as a foreign offering not grown on its soil but yet sufficiently authenticated—and seek to compare and connect them with everything that it has within its power as speculative reason.”³³

Kant attempts to show this inseparable connection with immortality by arguing that no finite being can achieve complete conformity to the moral law, or holiness, in the span of this life. Immortality, however, provides the prospect of infinite progression toward moral perfection, and thereby the

30. Ibid., p. 145.

31. Ibid., p. 153.

32. Ibid., pp. 154–155.

33. Ibid., p. 154.

possibility of meeting the demand of the moral law. This is the heart of the first dimension of Kantian moral faith.

Similarly, Kant argues for the moral necessity of postulating the existence of God, for only the existence of God can assure happiness that corresponds with moral virtue. This is the second dimension of Kantian moral faith.

Now, it was a duty for us to further the highest good; and hence [we have] not only the authority, but also the necessity linked as a need with duty, to presuppose the possibility of the highest good, which, since it has [its] place only under the condition of the existence of God, links the presupposition of God inseparably with duty; i.e., it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God.³⁴

Kant goes on immediately to make clear that this moral necessity does not itself generate a duty. Nor does he mean to say we must assume the existence of God as a basis for all obligation. To the contrary, the sole basis of moral duty is autonomous human reason, which clearly prescribes our obligations. Our duty remains to promote the highest good, and reason alone makes this clear. But since the possibility of the highest good is thinkable only by supposing God's existence, it is a rational necessity to do so.

From the standpoint of theoretical reason, God's existence remains only a hypothesis. "But in reference to the understandability of an object (the highest good) assigned to us, after all by the moral law, and hence a need with a practical aim, it can be called faith, specifically pure *rational faith*, because pure reason alone (in its theoretical as well as in its practical use) is the source from which it springs."³⁵ It is a practical need, then, to have this "pure rational faith" if we are to understand the highest good that a priori moral truth obligates us to strive to advance.

This understanding of the highest good leads us to recognize our duties as divine commands "because we can hope to reach the highest good, which the moral law makes it our duty to posit as the object of our endeavor, only through a will that is morally perfect (holy and benign) and simultaneously also all-powerful, and thus through harmony with this

34. Ibid., p. 159.

35. Ibid., p. 160.

will.” But Kant immediately goes on to reiterate that our entire motivation must be duty and duty alone. While recognizing the moral law as divine commands allows us to hope we can reach the highest good, we cannot let that be our motivation. “Hence here, too, everything remains devoid of self-interest and based only on duty, and does not have to be based on fear or hope, which, when they become principles, annihilate the whole moral worth of actions.”³⁶

True morality, then, remains “devoid of self-interest,” and here we think Kant overstated his case. But first, it’s important to understand his point. Part of having moral faith consists in believing that God guarantees that we do not have to violate our moral obligations in order to be happy. The antinomy of practical reason, though, arises precisely from the apparent contradiction generated by the highest good—happiness and virtue properly proportioned. It is true *a priori* that it is the necessary object of our will, so it must be possible to achieve, but on the other hand it seems impossible for us to do so.³⁷ What is all-important to Kantian morality is whether the incentive provided by the agent’s happiness is subordinate to the incentive provided by the moral law, or vice versa. In the former case, one is guided by the good maxim, in the latter by the bad. As human beings, however, we’re bound by our very nature to desire our own happiness, and we need to be able to foresee this happiness as consistent with our choices, particularly as they pertain to the moral life. If we are to endorse the long-term shape of our lives, we have to see that shape as eventually resulting in our own happiness.

The picture Kant paints, however, at times seems to suggest that, even though God’s existence must be postulated to make sense of how the highest good can be thought to be possible, the very hope that God’s existence makes possible will “annihilate the whole moral worth of actions” if we consciously act on that hope. Although we concur that *acting on that hope in the sense of assigning considerations of self-interest primacy in egoistic or mercenary fashion* is morally impermissible, we retain the conviction that normal healthy human considerations of self-interest are a perfectly legitimate part of moral motivation, a point that Kant obscures, to say the least. Indeed, the very rationality of morality not only allows such motivation, but encourages and fully endorses it.

36. Ibid., p. 164.

37. Ibid., pp. 144–145.

The Tao, the Dualism, and Postulates of Practical Reason

Let us now return to Lewis and his case for the *Tao* in light of Sidgwick and Kant. It is striking first of all that all three of these thinkers, diverse as they are in some ways, agree that there are self-evident moral truths that are axiomatic in their clarity and moral authority. This is not to claim that their views are identical on this point, but the agreement about the rational accessibility of foundational moral truth is nonetheless impressive. Where they diverge, however, is even more interesting, and this pertains to the ultimate reason morality is rational and has binding authority over us. On this score, we think all three of these thinkers come up short.

Recall that, for Lewis, the *Tao* is “rationality itself,” and any attempt to find a more fundamental rational ground for morality is bound to fail. We must simply see the truth of the *Tao*, and hold fast to a “dogmatic belief in objective value.” Now insofar as Lewis is making the epistemic point that moral truth is accessible to all people, whether or not they believe in God, we fully agree. This does not, of course, settle one way or the other the ontological question of the ultimate nature of morality. But neither does it settle the question of why, or whether, morality is rationally binding.

We agree very much with Sidgwick’s analysis of the “dualism of practical reason,” and indeed, we think secular ethics is vulnerable on precisely the example Lewis cites as the “crucial experiment” for assessing the moral viability of a system of thought. Here it is important to be clear just where Lewis and Sidgwick are at odds. In Lewis’s view, we are rationally “obliged forever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*.” So we take this to mean that it is not merely a “sweet and seemly thing” for soldiers fighting for a good cause to be willing to sacrifice their lives, but rather that they are rationally and morally obligated to do so.

Now Sidgwick does not deny that a soldier who chooses to sacrifice his life for a good cause is rational. Indeed, perhaps the soldier will die with a sense of deep satisfaction, knowing that he has made the ultimate sacrifice, has offered the greatest love, for the sake of people he dearly treasures, and this for him will be “sweet and seemly.” But Sidgwick’s point is that the soldier who declines to do so in order to seek his own happiness, which he thinks will be better served by continuing to live, is no less rational. Here is where reason is divided, and this is what generated the “dualism of practical reason” that Sidgwick acknowledged made it necessary to abandon the idea of showing that morality is completely rational.

Recall that Sidgwick acknowledged “a faith deeply rooted in the moral consciousness of mankind” that there could not ultimately be a conflict between acting for one’s personal well-being and acting for the sake of the larger good. Recall too his admission in his own case of “a desire, apparently inseparable from the moral sentiments,” that the “performance of duty will be suitably rewarded and its violation punished.”

There is obviously a ready theistic explanation for these deeply rooted convictions and desires. On a theistic view, these desires are not “doomed to disappointment,” but rather they promise fulfillment because they reflect the ultimate rationality of morality.

Clearly, an account of morality is to be preferred if it does not have to settle for something less than full rationality. While Sidgwick was confident that the axiomatic truth he affirmed was “separable” from belief in God, and indeed from any account of how performance of duty will be adequately rewarded and violation punished, he underestimated the cost of surrendering complete rationality. Indeed, he was far too sanguine that the moral truths that were axiomatic for him could sustain the status of duty or obligation without the conviction of ultimate sanctions.

A truly satisfying account of moral obligation requires ultimate sanctions, and this is where morality requires a satisfying ontology to be fully rational. We can distinguish between moral obligation as an epistemic insight, and moral obligation that is ontologically and rationally binding. To affirm moral obligation in the first sense is simply to hold that basic moral truth is intuitively obvious, that we can see what is right, what we ought to do and so on. But the second sense is necessary to confirm that moral obligation is what it appears to be, and that it has the force it seems to have. It holds that moral obligation is rooted in ultimate reality in such a way that we cannot flout or ignore its demands with impunity, or escape its requirements. Ultimate reality underwrites moral obligation so thoroughly that there is an unbreakable connection between morality and the personal well-being of all moral agents, individually as well as collectively.

This is the conviction, of course, that led Kant to affirm God and immortality as postulates of practical reason, claims that Lewis attempted to do without in *The Abolition of Man*, and that Sidgwick explicitly denied. George Mavrodes, who has argued that moral obligation is “queer” in a naturalistic world, put this Kantian insight as follows.

I suspect that what we have in Kant is the recognition that there cannot be, in any “reasonable” way, a moral demand upon me, unless reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way. It makes sense only if there is a moral demand on the world too and only if reality will in the end satisfy that demand.³⁸

The demands of morality, it must be reiterated, are often difficult and even extremely costly. The issue, again, is what obligates us to pay the price of morality, and whether such a demand can be a reasonable one to accept if the cost is not compensated.

It is worth emphasizing again that while Kant and Sidgwick agree that morality is not fully rational if meeting our moral obligation is not suitably rewarded, they are deeply at odds over whether in fact morality is fully rational. They also part from each other on the proper place of self-interest in moral motivation. We side with Sidgwick in affirming self-interest as a legitimate aspect of moral motivation. What Kant requires is that moral duty and motivation should be totally compartmentalized from the postulates that make it possible to do our duty to work to advance the highest good. Belief in God and the hope for a happiness that corresponds to virtue must not be quarantined from the reasons for doing our duty.

The subsequent history of moral philosophy after Sidgwick, particularly the emotivism that emerged in the early twentieth century, suggests that Sidgwick’s confidence that the moral truths he intuitively discerned needed no further grounding was misplaced. While these truths may have seemed entirely secure in a culture still very much shaped by two thousand years of Christian thought, especially when the bombs were dropping, in fact they were not.

Epistemic access to fundamental moral truth is not enough, even to sustain the moral authority of those very truths. Full moral rationality requires an ontological ground of morality that, among other things, “guarantees” an unbreakable connection between morality and the ultimate self-interest of all rational beings.

38. George Mavrodes, “Religion and the Queerness of Morality,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, & Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 220.

Introduction to Part III

This book began, in Part I, by laying the groundwork of our argument. We chronicled salient features from the history of ideas to explain the emergence of key secular themes among ethicists. We pointed out the dangers of overreaching, when thinkers try illegitimately or even tendentiously to co-opt ideas or even important figures in the history of philosophy to their side, rather than allowing the ideas to do their work and for such thinkers to speak for themselves and in their own voice, often in ways that defy our rigid pre-established categories and entrenched expectations. Then we made the case that there are at least dialectical advantages to casting the moral argument in abductive terms, and we talked about the challenges secularism faces from the related issues of evil and meaningful agency.

Part II tried to deliver what we promised in Part I: a critique of a range of secular ethical theories and their ability to explain various moral phenomena. The moral facts in need of explanation were fourfold: matters ontological and epistemic, and matters performative and rational. The metaphysical issue was divided between the good and the right, and so Chapters 4–6 provided the heart of our argument, canvassing those most central and foundational philosophical areas of metaphysics and epistemology. Bearing in mind Peirce’s suggestion that the best explanation be subjected to further testing, Chapters 7 and 8 extended the argument to the two aspects of Kantian moral faith: the need and possibility for dramatic moral transformation, and the rational requirement that virtue and joy be consistent.

What we have argued is that secular and naturalistic theories of morality have a great deal to offer. Brilliant thinkers are at work in these areas producing wonderful, insightful, and sometimes beautiful analysis. Nevertheless, we have also argued that, in each case, secular ethical theory comes up short, its perspicacity notwithstanding. We did not, nor need

we, argue that it can make no progress at all; to the contrary, we suggested that, if theism is true, there are all the more reasons to think that various secular approaches will yield a number of dividends. But by confining themselves to the resources of this world alone, they appear, by our lights, hard-pressed to make full rational sense of morality.

In this final part and last chapter of the book, we shift our focus and offer, more positively, what we consider to be the better explanation of and firmer foundation for morality. Here we will extend the case that we made in *Good God* and argue that classical theism and orthodox Christianity provide the best explanation of such moral realities as intrinsic human value, binding moral obligations, essential human rights, moral knowledge, radical moral transformation, and the convergence of happiness and holiness. If our case is successful, it will mean that morality provides powerful reasons to believe in the existence of a God who not only created and sustained the world, but whose character and nature is good and love.

9

A Moral Argument

*Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing
wonder and awe,
the more often and the more intensely the mind
of thought is drawn to them:
the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.¹*

IMMANUEL KANT

IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES; morality matters. Foundations inadequate to sustain strong moral convictions jeopardize both individuals and whole societies. For reasons discussed throughout this volume, we doubt that morality, if understood in anything like the traditional sense of the word, can long subsist on the resources of naturalism alone. This important reason undergirds our thinking and inspired this book.

While Richard Dawkins is hardly the highest-caliber representative of a naturalistic perspective—though he's certainly one of the most read if book sales are any indication—we still think telling his recent bold Twitter declaration that there is a moral imperative to abort children conceived with Down Syndrome. We cannot help but lament his attitude and words about those children; we consider his understanding of morality not just to be wrong, but veritably hideous. How we treat the most helpless of our species is one of the clearest indications of our moral maturity and development.

Yet we also cannot help but wonder whether Dawkins, with all his bravado, is prescient, ahead of the curve, a preview of coming attractions, someone who can see, perhaps with more clarity than most, the moral

1. According to Jostein Gaarder, this line of Kant's, one of his most quoted sayings, is carved on his gravestone in Konigsberg. Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy*, trans. Paulette Moller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 259.

trajectory of naturalism. Fortunately, most naturalists and secularists haven't gone this far, and therefore seem rather better than their world-view, retaining moral common sense. We have been directing the discussion of this book toward them. We celebrate their continuing commitment to moral realism, often manifested in exemplary lives, but we will now suggest that the more the implications of a secular worldview come to light, the harder it will be for its proponents to retain considerable moral confidence.

The good news is that there is a better explanation of morality on offer, one that can—and rightly ought to—bolster strong moral confidence in right and wrong, good and evil, and the noblest aspirations of humanists.

Cumulative, Abductive, and Teleological

The first chapter of *Good God* critically scrutinized secular ethics, and the rest of the book defended theistic ethics. Here in *God and Cosmos* the first eight chapters explore and critique secular ethics, and this last one reiterates our moral case for God's existence, building on insights gleaned along the way. This makes the two volumes companion pieces of moral apologetics. And while this chapter concludes the book, given the nature of the argument we are advancing, it remains suggestive and open-ended, though we think the evidence we will sketch has a clear trajectory.

The moral argument we wish to provide is (1) cumulative, (2) abductive, and (3) teleological. We have spoken of its cumulative and abductive features already. It is *cumulative* in that the range of moral phenomena to be explained spans deontic and axiological concerns, along with epistemic, performative, and rational ones. It is *abductive* in its argument that theism provides the *best* explanation of these various moral phenomena, not that it provides the *only* explanation. And so, for present purposes, plausibilities trump mere possibilities.²

If, for discussion purposes, atheists are afforded the chance to assume a world as rich as this one to be a Godless world, it would be surprising if

2. Initial probability assessments of theism are relevant here. For those for whom such assessments are sufficiently low, adducing mere nontheistic possibilities, however remote, might be seen to be sufficient to avoid the force of the theistic argument. This dynamic was evident, for example, in the third debate on the resurrection between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas. See *Did the Resurrection Happen? A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*, ed. David Baggett (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), pp. 147–148.

they couldn't make any progress in ethical theory—all the more so, indeed, if classical theists are right and this world possesses the features it does because God created it, because he inhabited it with creatures like us made in his image, and because—as his handiwork—it manifests signals of transcendence. The cosmos is a remarkable thing, however conceived, sufficiently awe-inspiring that it's tempting to treat it as ultimate. We don't in any way wish to devalue, trivialize, or impugn it. With Kant it stirs within us, too, ever increasing wonder and awe. We well understand, but do not concur with, Berkeley's theological rationale for affirming idealism: the fear that positing a natural world would lead to its worship. Nevertheless, we think the evidence suggests that, as amazing and profound, and as awe-inspiring and mysterious as the world is, it remains contingent, and, considered in isolation, incomplete where morality is concerned.

A world as atheists envision it lacks overarching purpose; in this connection, the third element of our moral apologetic is *teleology*. A theme that has echoed throughout the book, teleology—an irreducibly mental concept—involves, among other things, the issue of human nature, what humanness is about, and, relatedly, what our goal, destination, or purpose is. Secularists, understandably, are often ambivalent about such a category, many of them suspecting it is an old-fashioned concept difficult to justify and perhaps best dispensed with. Other secular theorists try to retain the category, but find it challenging in light of the limitations of their worldview. In particular, naturalistic evolution assigns primacy to efficient causes, has no sense of our being purposely created, and at best provides a quasi-teleological account of things.

A rich human *telos*, however, fits most comfortably in theism, and teleology, we will argue, runs through and ties together the theistic explanations of each moral datum in need of explanation. This teleology will often lend itself to a better explanation, a more penetrating analysis that does not require the concepts under discussion to be watered down, domesticated, or otherwise reduced or denied altogether. The sort of robust explanation of the full range of moral phenomena in question will be both theistic and, as a consequence, richly teleological.

We are, without apology, using distinctively *moral* reasons to argue this is the case. In concert with Sorley and resonating with James, Kant, and others, we will argue that morality, robustly understood, provides evidence to believe in a reality deeper than the physical world alone. Learning to appreciate the cosmos rightly involves seeing that it points beyond itself, as its very contingency must. Moral truth is evidentially significant,

metaphysically revelatory, or so we argue. Having seen some of the inherent limitations a wide array of secular ethical theories encounter, we are ready to outline the case that theistic ethics can explain morality better, and, if so, we have reason to infer to it as the most likely explanation of these important realities. Morality furnishes some of the most important convictions we hold, some of our most treasured beliefs that, we think, make us distinctively human. They tend to be beliefs of the most passionate conviction; they provide constraints on our behaviors, strictures that we shudder to think what a world without them would look like. And they provide some of our highest ideals to which we aspire.

Without further delay, then, consider again the topics we have explicated and explored in this book, in this order: free will and the problem of evil, moral goodness, moral obligations, moral knowledge, moral transformation, and moral rationality. We respectfully offer here our considered perspective, which, naturally, we find persuasive and compelling. We offer it, too, as an argument, in the hopes that readers might come to agree with us, but we do so without any pretense that each of its parts or even its overall cumulative effect will be found universally persuasive. Hardly any arguments are. Still, we think the components of the argument collectively constitute a strong case for the theistic worldview even greater than the sum of its individual parts. It is a consistent and coherent, integrated and powerful picture of morality that makes sense because it features extensive explanatory scope and strength, and deeply resonates with intuitions that, for many of us, feature the deepest ingestion.

Free Will and the Problem of Evil

Some practically deify and idolize free will, arrogating to human beings prerogatives not just to choose *to do* the right and the good, but to create their content. Some have suggested we ditch the concept of free will altogether, relegating it to the outdated faith of our fathers somewhere in the past. Others have called for revisions in our understanding of it to repair its weaknesses and replace its ingredients. Yet others continue to extol free will, rightly cast, as the symbol of our highest and best selves, a mark of our dignity and our very humanity, perhaps even a way of imaging God. So vexed an issue as freedom calls for an investigation not only into what, if anything, can be salvaged on this score, but also into the more fundamental question of what it means to be human.

Meaningful agency is a central piece of the human puzzle, distinguishing us from both animals driven by instinct alone and automatons following their programming. Genuine free will requires, at a minimum, the sort of agency enabling morally significant decisions for which we can be properly ascribed blame or praise. In a naturalistic world, such freedom, we think, is hard to come by.

Among secular thinkers, it is interesting to note, there is a debate on this issue that parallels the moral divide between nihilists and moral realists; in fact, a great deal of overlap obtains in the divergent camps. One group of secular thinkers accepts the implications of a mechanistic world and denies that we have meaningful agency. Nietzsche himself thought we are not free, but rather determined—and determinism, on this view, precludes meaningful free will.

Another group of secularists accept that we live in a largely determined world, at least at the macro level, but they try to reconcile meaningful agency with determinism. Just as some try to make sense of moral realism by redefining the terms—talking about rules or guidelines or reasons for action more than binding and authoritative obligations—compatibilists similarly redefine free will, domesticating it to fit within their metaphysical paradigm. Even if we can never categorically do otherwise when we make choices, they say, we can do otherwise at least conditionally. Namely, if our desires had been different, we could have done otherwise. As it is, our desires, brain states, and the laws of the world being what they are, all of our actions are determined and could not have been otherwise. Nevertheless, we are free when we do what we want to do, and we have the ability to do otherwise at least counterfactually.³

One of the stiffest challenges such a view of freedom faces is to make sense of deep moral culpability. We saw the way Dennett valiantly tried to retain the category of retributive justice and the language of just deserts, even in a fully determined world. His arguments fall short, and inevitably so. His compatibilist view attempts to forge freedom from inferior stuff, subverting a central notion of freedom itself: the notion that we ourselves, not an inexorable process underway before we were ever born, are (often anyway) the originating source of our choices. We are the ones, to a real degree, morally responsible for our choices. Without such

3. Of course there are minority positions other than these two main positions, but we set them aside for present purposes.

freedom, genuine ascriptions of right and wrong—important moral data to explain—are rendered difficult indeed, as even many secularists themselves have granted, opting to replace the category of retributive justice with the tamer, thinner, less ambitious categories of deterrence or rehabilitation (sometimes while paradoxically casting aspersions at those who retain retribution as an operative category).

This difficulty that some secularists face in accounting for moral culpability leads to what Alvin Plantinga calls “a theistic argument from evil,” which goes something like this. There is real and genuine evil in the world: the Holocaust, ISIS zealots beheading children, and other appalling actions of the sort that make belief in human depravity seem plausible indeed. In a nontheistic world, though, how could there be such a thing as *evil*? Evils are not softened or mitigated by their perpetrators crazily thinking themselves right or justified in committing them; those very convictions are part of their perversity, another paradigmatic reason for the deepest culpability. Only within the rarefied atmosphere of university seminar rooms is such an outlandish “excuse” taken with much seriousness. Moral common sense declares that certain acts are morally evil, hideous, dehumanizing, the sort of thing that can maim and scar and rob people of meaning and hope. Natural evils can wreak havoc and destroy lives, undoubtedly, but though nature can be brutal, it isn’t intentionally cruel the way people can be.

In this light, how can secular ethicists undergird as robust a category as genuine and horrifying evil, morally culpable brutality, meaning-depriving viciousness deserving of the deepest moral censure? Where does deep moral responsibility belong in a world marching to the inexorable beat of physical determinism? And even if they offer some resources along these lines—the feelings of disgust common to human beings, traditional language they assiduously retain, shared moral intuitions—can they offer as good, as deep, as probing an account as a classical theist can?

We doubt it very much. How, in contrast, does a Christian rightly think about evil? As Plantinga writes,

It is indeed utterly appalling and horrifying; it is defying God, the source of all that is good and just. It has a sort of cosmic significance: in this way it is the other side of the coin from the argument from love. There we see that the deep significance of love can’t be explained in terms of naturalistic categories; the same goes here. From a naturalistic perspective, there is nothing much more to

evil—say the sheer horror of the Holocaust, of Pol Pot, or a thousand other villains—than there is to the way in which animals savage each other. [It's] a natural outgrowth of natural processes.⁴

In our estimation, the moral argument and the problem of evil are locked in a zero-sum game, where either the moral argument for a perfectly good God will undercut and ultimately defeat the problem of evil, or vice versa. But we are not at present offering a solution to the problem of evil. Rather, we are respectfully arguing that evil truly is horrible and that moral evil is a real category predicated on human agency more substantive than the resources of naturalism allow. An implicit denial or domestication of the crucial categories making possible the articulation and felt force of the problem of evil is evidence of a deficient worldview. Moral outrage and revulsion are vital moral categories in need of explanation and adequate metaphysical foundation; likewise moral freedom of the sort needed for ascriptions of deep moral culpability. Theism explains such realities better than naturalism does. The reality of evil must remain a problem to solve for any viable worldview; in a world rife and fraught with sufferings and tragedies, when the explanation for evil explains it away, when a worldview lacks the vocabulary to articulate and the ontology to sustain it, there is a bigger problem still—not to mention the dissipation of any possible hope of ultimate resolution.

Whereas we don't pretend to offer a full solution to the problem of evil, we think that this is, in a real way, deeply appropriate, because the nature of the problem is that it needs to persist, for now, *as a problem*. Evil creates very deep tensions, raises very hard questions, and is a challenge for our worldview, but a challenge that we are convinced is tractable. If the biblical narrative is indeed as revelatory as we think, God is at work fixing this, setting the world aright, in his way and time. For certain reasons that remain partially beyond our ken, he allows evil to run its course, but we are still in the middle of the story, and the prospect of an ultimate resolution remains, rendering God's obituary premature.

Tidy solutions to a problem as messy and entrenched as evil are neither true to the nature of the problem nor congruent with the reality of what is going on. We do, however, retain hope for its ultimate defeat, and we

4. Alvin Plantinga, "Two Dozen or So Theistic Arguments," the essay on which a forthcoming book will be based, to be edited by Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls.

concur with Marilyn Adams that “If Divine Goodness is infinite, if intimate relation to It is thus incommensurably good for created persons, then we have identified a good big enough to defeat horrors in every case.”⁵ To this important issue of goodness we now turn.

Moral Goodness

Some push the point that, along with the problem of evil, secularists face a particularly difficult version of the problem of goodness: how, in a naturalistic or otherwise atheistic world, can good be accounted for? Of course it makes perfect sense to speak of what is *good for* human beings, but this isn’t enough to account for moral goodness. Recall that we critiqued Foot for failing to cross this divide, and Menuge, Ritchie, and Joyce all emphasized that what conduces to reproductive advantage for human beings is not necessarily moral. On occasion horrific human rights abuses may have evolutionary advantages, but this hardly makes them morally good, much less obligatory; they are not even as much as morally permissible.⁶

In this book, we have dealt with goodness by focusing on one particularly pressing issue of moral value: the inherent dignity and worth of human persons.⁷ We argued that it seems unlikely that ascriptions of human value are

5. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 82–83.

6. The legitimate insights of Foot’s analysis retain their best hope of providing some of the materials we need for the right moral theory when conjoined with something like robust theism. An account of intrinsic moral values and substantive virtues and vices; a rich theistic account that more deeply comports with, while appropriately extending, the worldview of Aristotle; adequate resources for a principled belief in morally charged natural normativities; an account of morality based on who we are that is rooted yet more ultimately in who God is; a sturdy account of intrinsic human value and an account of why human flourishing is an intrinsic moral good; in each case, Foot’s best insights nicely fit into a theistic framework, while the limitations of her more purely naturalistic account are thereby rectified. To us this is the likely most fertile and fruitful direction to look.

7. In *Good God* we discussed goodness in broader terms, and argued, among other things, for God’s necessary impeccability. Bruce Reichenbach has recently offered a few criticisms of our approach. He notes that, on our view, “what God wills is necessarily good based on God’s love and wisdom and is rationally grounded in God’s essential nature.” [See Bruce Reichenbach, “God and Good Revisited,” *Philosophia Christi* 16, no. 2 (2014): 319.] He argues instead that, though moral goodness can be appropriately ascribed to God, it can’t be ascribed if God’s goodness is thought to be logically necessary. Where God is concerned, though, it is simply anthropomorphic, objectionably univocal, to require his character be formed through a process, as Reichenbach insists. Reichenbach’s heavily a posteriori decision procedure here for selecting his criteria for meaningful ascriptions of goodness, in our estimation, results in something very close to

equally valid irrespective of which worldview is true. In a world, for example, in which we are the product of the accidental collocation of atoms, it is difficult to see how value of the kind we are concerned with emerges out of morally indifferent matter. The point in dispute here is not whether human beings have inherent value; we are assuming they do. The question, again, is what best accounts for this truth?

Ideas have a history and a power to them. Although it is tempting to attribute our awareness of human dignity to intuition or some other transparent moral apprehension, the reality is that the notion of inherent human dignity is a recognition that came about only after a protracted evolution of moral thought that included seminal, transformative ethical paradigm shifts along the way. David Bentley Hart, with these historical realities very much in mind, warns against the sanguine assumption that human dignity will continue to be assumed as sacrosanct:

The more vital and essential victory of Christianity lay in the strange, impractical, altogether unworldly tenderness of the moral intuitions it succeeded in sowing in human consciences. If we find ourselves occasionally shocked by how casually ancient men and women destroyed or ignored lives we would think ineffably precious, we would do well to reflect that theirs was—in purely pragmatic terms—a more “natural” disposition toward reality. It required an extraordinary moment of awakening in a few privileged

anthropomorphism. Even if God does not have moral obligations, he can still be trusted to act lovingly because love is what he essentially is within the perichoretic relationship of the Trinity—which fundamentally distinguishes Christianity from Islam. Is God’s action toward us free, despite being a function of his nature? Yes, on our view, because our understanding of libertarian freedom is explicable according to sourcehood conditions that, in this case, are entirely satisfied. His effort to say that our affirmation is based in “logic” may be part of the problem. If our resistance does make appeal to a logical consideration, it’s a broadly logical consideration, in Plantinga’s sense—in other words, a metaphysical one (which is inextricably tied to God’s loving nature). That there is no world in which God fails to act according to his perfectly loving nature is a function of God being the delimiter of possible worlds. Reichenbach’s affirmation of God’s contingent goodness and his *de dicto* analysis of impeccability stand in irremediable tension. If, in any possible world, the being *thought* to be God did evil, then by Reichenbach’s analysis (and ours), the being in question would not be God after all, because the being wouldn’t qualify for the office (owing to a *de dicto* analysis of impeccability Reichenbach endorses). This entails there is no world in which God does evil, which in turn entails that, metaphysically speaking, God can’t do evil—for there is no metaphysically possible world in which he does. Reichenbach’s affirmation of God’s contingent goodness and his *de dicto* analysis of impeccability are at odds.

souls, and then centuries of the relentless and total immersion of culture in the Christian story, to make even the best of us conscious (or at least able to believe in) the moral claim of all other persons upon us, the splendor and irreducible dignity of the divine humanity within them, that depth within each of them that potentially touches upon the eternal. In the light of Christianity's absolute law of charity, we came to see what formerly we could not; the autistic or Down syndrome or otherwise disabled child, for instance, for whom the world can remain a perpetual perplexity, which can too often cause pain but perhaps only vaguely and fleetingly charm or delight; the derelict or wretched or broken man or woman who has wasted his or her life away; the homeless, the utterly impoverished, the diseased, the mentally ill, the physically disabled; exiles, refugees, fugitives; even criminals and reprobates. To reject, turn away from, or kill any or all of them would be, in a very real sense, the most purely practical of impulses. To be able, however, to see in them not only something of worth but indeed something potentially godlike, to be cherished and adored, is the rarest and most ennoblingly unrealistic capacity ever bred within human souls. To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental existence, and from those natural limitations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality. And only someone profoundly ignorant of history and of native human inclinations could doubt that it is only as a consequence of the revolutionary force of Christianity within our history, within the very heart of our shared nature, that any of us can experience this freedom. We deceive ourselves also, however, if we doubt how very fragile this vision of things truly is: how elusive this truth that only charity can know, how easily forgotten this mystery that only charity can penetrate.⁸

8. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 213–214.

It is not that belief in God is either necessary or sufficient to believe in human dignity, but that a theistic worldview is better able, ontologically speaking, to explain intrinsic human dignity.

The Kantian principle of treating others as ends in themselves is inextricably tied to human agency, a very difficult category for thoroughgoing naturalists to accommodate, as our discussion of Dennett and others tried to show. To respect others is to respect their freedom, on Kant's view. Other persons serve as a moral limit on our actions. Treating humanity as an end in itself meant, for Kant, respecting the capacity of others for free and rational choice; it is a matter of respecting autonomy.⁹

To treat another human being as merely a means is to ignore the other as a center of agency, which entails that coercion and deception, for obvious reasons, represent rather paradigmatic violations of the principle. Kant thought that the moral law and persons have dignity rather than a mere price. Genuine respect for others requires respect for the moral law. My respecting you calls for my acting for the sake of certain direct duties to you, but, as Linville puts it, "the whole thing unravels unless Kant is correct in affording dignity to the moral law."¹⁰ Part II of this book argued at length that secular ethics have a devil of a time providing the grounding for objective moral truth that Kant's account here requires.

This is a good illustration of the fact that values dear to the heart of humanism are not best supported by and grounded in a secular ethic. The emergence of so-called "secular humanism" has inclined some to conflate humanism with secularism and to confer on the very locution *humanism* the status of a pejorative in the minds of many believers, sadly enough. The reality, however, is that it remains obscure how human equality and dignity are explained by the resources of secularism and naturalism alone. Indeed, naturalism leaves much to be desired on this score and often has the ring of wishful thinking as it forges ahead, assuring us the "death of God" was trivial. In contrast, historically, Christian thinkers ranging from Desiderius Erasmus to John Milton to Jacques Maritain to Flannery O'Connor have called themselves humanists. As Christian humanists they thought of human beings as essentially equal and inherently valuable,

9. In 2000 Linville responded to the charge that the doctrine of human dignity is "speciesist to the core" and "the moral effluvium of a discredited metaphysics" by arguing, in the spirit of Kant, that moral agency is a great-making property that confers special worth on its bearer. See "A Defense of Human Dignity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 3 (July 2000): 320–332.

10. Linville, "The Moral Argument," p. 439.

having been stamped in the image of God—thereby providing a strong foundation for humanist values.¹¹

In an effort to salvage the notion of humanism from a secularist agenda, in 1982 a group of Christian thinkers including James Sire, Donald Bloesch, and Arthur Holmes drafted a *Christian Humanist Manifesto* in response to the *Humanist Manifesto II* of 1973. Human beings are, on the Christian story, despite their fallenness, imbued with the *imago dei*, which can thereby ground humanistic values more reliably than can the resources of naturalism.¹²

Despite the prodigious efforts of some secularists to retain the category of a human *telos*, Daniel Dennett assumes that, on naturalism, all ultimate explanations must be mechanistic, so that the teleological, where it occurs, must be explained in mechanistic terms. This is potentially question-begging on his part, but it is also just where the theist would demur and reverse the order. “The most ultimate explanations—including an explanation of why we observe lawlike relations that obtain among physical things—are teleological in nature because the world exists due to the creative activity of God,” as Linville writes. Theism offers an account of human persons that permits the irreducibility of human consciousness and purposes. “According to the theist, God is personal and is the

11. Nietzsche wrote this: “If the English really do believe they will know, of their own accord, ‘intuitively’, what is good and evil; if they consequently think they have no need of Christianity as a guarantee of morality; that is merely the *consequence* of the ascendancy of Christian evaluation and an expression of the *strength* and *depth* of this ascendancy: so that the origin of English morality has been forgotten, so that the highly conditional nature of its right to exist is no longer felt. For the Englishmen morality is not yet a problem....” See his *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 81.

12. More recently Angus Ritchie and Nick Spencer have published “The Case for Christian Humanism,” in which they argue that Christians ought to be more aware and prouder of their humanist credentials, rather than allowing humanism to become a cipher for atheism. Were it not for Christianity, they argue, the core ideas of humanism would not have developed in Europe. Humanism’s breadth is not adequately predicated on emaciated metaphysics, but rather on depth of explanation. Ever wider inclusion sans such depth is more likely to come to be seen as empty sentimentalism. See <http://moralapologetics.com/category/humanism/> (accessed March 5, 2015) Agnostic political science professor Guenter Lewy said this when he contrasted the mindset of the naturalist and religious believer: “Adherents of [a naturalistic] ethic are not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa.” Guenter Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 137. We find it remarkable that so many secularists willing to fight for, say, nuclear disarmament are also usually the most vocal supporters of a practice like abortion, targeting the most helpless of our species. Loving humanity in general but not humans in particular is problematic.

source of all value so that the value of personhood is found in the fact that the metaphysically, axiologically, and explanatorily ultimate Being is a person.”¹³

To love one’s neighbor as oneself, as the Bible enjoins, is not to conjure artificial warm sentiments toward them, but to recognize their intrinsic worth and dignity and honor that obtain irrespective of whether or not there is reciprocation. Linville puts this beautifully:

The conjunction of a love for God and neighbor is no coincidence, as the rationale for loving one’s neighbor—humanity in general—is grounded in the very reasons for loving God with the entirety of one’s being. And this is because the *value* of persons is, in turn, grounded in the personhood of God. Persons *qua* persons are created in the image of God in that God himself is a person. On a Judeo-Christian worldview, *human* personal dignity, though intrinsic, is derivative. The value of human persons is found in the fact that, as bearers of the *imago dei*, they bear a significant resemblance to God in their very personhood. God and human persons share an overlap of kind membership in personhood itself, and human dignity is found precisely in membership in that kind.¹⁴

Erik Wielenberg raises an objection at just this point, however. Noting a common theme among a number of theists, he issues an “explanandum-centered challenge to Adams’s, Murphy’s, and Zagzebski’s accounts of the goodness of finite things.”¹⁵ He wants to say humans are good in themselves (valuable, we take him to mean), rather than having only a derived or extrinsic goodness—coming from God. He sees Linville’s particularism as another example of a denial that humans have intrinsic value, and his own nontheistic robust normative realism as allowing for intrinsic goodness distinct from God.

At least two important points are in order here. Our abductive approach starts with such moral facts as the intrinsic value of human beings as something in need of explanation. If such value obtains because

13. Linville, p. 443.

14. Ibid., pp. 444–445.

15. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 84.

we have been imbued with it by God, having been made in his image, that relational quality does not do away with intrinsic worth. Relationality and intrinsicality are neither at odds nor mutually exclusive; to consider an analogy, water's molecular composition is intrinsic to it and features a relationship between different atoms. Water is essentially relational; if human beings have been created by God in his image, we too are essentially relational, and essential features we possess may well remain derivative in virtue of that essential relationality. The dependence on God is an explanatory advantage and strength of our theory, because it is predicated on the existence of an ultimate principled, primordial, and personal good by which finite goods can be adequately explained. If theism is right, intrinsic goodness may simply have to be re-envisioned as fundamentally relational.¹⁶

In contrast, a sufficient account of intrinsic value is hard to find in Wielenberg's account. He can and should affirm human dignity and worth, but assuming that such an affirmation without adequate metaphysics to back it up is a virtue of his approach leaves us unconvinced. His inability to point to a larger story, unlike a theistic account, is a weakness of his approach, not a strength. Wielenberg puts forward an interesting suggestion to be sure: that his view, in affirming certain goods without explanation, is no different from theism in this regard, since the existence of goodness, on theism too, is a brute fact. He has a point, we admit, but just because both theories posit facts does not make their claims equally legitimate. If you were to claim your pen's existence is a brute fact, for example, the assertion would altogether lack merit. A theist has principled reasons to think that God's existence is necessary and that God functions as the very ground of being.¹⁷ What puts a proper end to the search for more adequate moral foundations is that there is in actuality, on this view, a real beginning and foundation to all else, a real locus of value, a primordial good of unsurpassable value. The brute facts posited by Wielenberg, in contrast, seem an ad hoc stopping point, invoking simply, in our estimation, some of the crucial moral facts in need of explanation, important in their own right to be sure, but evidential suggestions of something more.

16. Matt Jordan made this same point at a conference a few years ago.

17. Indeed, the locution of "brute facts" likely at least conversationally implicates a modal quality of contingency that does not properly apply to God's existence at all.

He is right to apprehend and affirm them, but resting content with an explanation of them as brute is to ask one question too few.

Moral Obligations

From goodness we turn to rightness. Remember that not everything good to do is obligatory to do. There is a variety of ways in which to explain moral obligations from a theistic perspective; divine command theory is just one of them, but it happens to be our favored approach, and it's been defended with energy and rigor by several in the recent literature. Such an account needs to rest on the foundation of a theory of the good, and two salient options for the theist are something like a Platonic theistic account (as Adams defends) and a theistic natural law account (as Evans defends).¹⁸ Platonists are inclined to speak in terms of intrinsic goodness, whereas natural lawyers often privilege teleological categories; some might think these to be in tension to some real degree. We would first like to say a few words about this, in an effort to show the possibility of their consistency and integration.

Take a soldier who does his job extremely well. This makes him, on a “teleological” model, a good soldier, doing what a soldier is to do. But surely we can’t leave it at that. For what if this soldier is a German in World War II in charge of sending innocent Jews to their unjust death? He may be altogether proficient in the task, doing what he’s been trained to do. *In that sense* he is a good soldier, but in the most important sense he is not a good soldier at all, and not just for being a bad man. In saying this we are appealing to the intuition that a soldier, placed in such circumstances, has duties *as a soldier* not just to obey orders, but to avoid crossing certain nonnegotiable lines. Sometimes the best way to be a good soldier is to defy authority, when the authority is commanding patent injustices, for

18. One dispute among natural law theorists is between derivationism and inclinationism. Derivationism says that our knowledge of what is good derives from our understanding of human nature, since one can’t grasp what perfects or completes human nature without an understanding of that nature. Inclinationism is the view of one like Finnis that says knowledge of basic good is something that is immediate and self-evident and something that is internal to the life of practical reason. Evans happens to find Murphy’s “real identity thesis” plausible that says the insight we have into the good through our inclinations and the knowledge we have about human flourishing through our understanding of human nature represent two alternative ways of grasping the same goods. Evans assumes that a natural law theory is one that holds that those goods are in some way determined by our nature, such that if human nature were fundamentally different, what would be good for humans would be fundamentally different as well.

example. In such cases the soldier should perhaps resign a commission, take a dishonorable discharge, and risk personal harm by not engaging in egregious wrongdoing.¹⁹

Being a good soldier, then, can't be explained merely in terms of following one's training—unless included in the training is to defy wrongful orders and the like, in which case the “purpose” designated for the soldier is sufficiently rich to include objective deontic constraints. A teleological account of “soldiering” minus such constraints would be inadequate, for it would leave out room to consider the implicit question that should never be ignored: Is it a good thing to perform one's stipulated function? Or is it bad, or even evil?

To see another illustration, take a skilled craftsman who is focused on achieving quality in his workmanship, on doing good work for its own sake. Such motivation can be said to be the primordial mark of identity of any craftsman, yet Nicholas Wolterstorff makes this astute observation: “There is something deficient about the person who does good work for its own sake without ever asking whether it's a good thing that this work be done. The estimable craftsman asks two questions concerning the good. He asks whether what he is doing or making for its own sake is a good example of its kind: a good violin, a good arpeggio, and so forth. But he also asks whether doing or making a good example of this kind is a good thing to do.”²⁰

Wolterstorff illustrates his point with an example of his own: “Oppenheimer ['the father of the Atomic Bomb'] came to know what a good bomb is and obsessively devoted himself to trying to make one; what he did *not* do at the time is ask himself whether making this good bomb was a good thing to do.”²¹

Wolterstorff's point powerfully illustrates an advantage to including central deontic conceptions in a teleological account. At least when it comes to matters of human goodness, a teleological account needs a richer foundation than purposes or intentions that are objectionably

19. Sometimes, by parity in reasoning, being a good businessman means sacrificing profit because integrity demands it. Or a good citizen may have an obligation to engage in civil disobedience to heed a higher law. It's an objectionably myopic view of business to treat it as exclusively devoted to the bottom line, or citizenship as blind submission, or soldierhood as acquiescence to authority come what may.

20. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Thinking with Your Hands,” in *Books and Culture* (March/April 2009), p. 30.

21. *Ibid.*

narrow. Teleology raises questions about how to do what one is intended for, but questions about intrinsic goods, human rights, and binding obligations are vital to answering the further question of whether what one is intended for is good to do. At least in this sense, a deep rapprochement is possible between theistic Platonist and theistic natural law accounts of the good—again, though, various conceptions of goodness are available to the classical theist, of which this attempt at an integrated conception is merely one (and we are merely gesturing in the direction of this integration).

On some such theistic foundation of goodness, then, we are inclined to endorse a divine command theory of moral obligations, as we argued at length in *Good God*. Such an account is able to explain the existence of robust moral obligations that satisfy the Anscombe intuition. Evans asks if there is room in natural law for divine command theory. Why might a natural law theorist think a divine command theory unnecessary? Evans thinks one reason is a failure to appreciate the distinction between the *discretion thesis* and the *modal status thesis*. Discretion allows God's commands some latitude and divine prerogative; the modal status thesis merely suggests that, even if there is no such latitude, God's commands add an extra authoritative element to what is commanded. Even Scotus, who affirmed the discretion thesis, held that some of what God commands is necessary. It is possible to affirm that this is true for all of God's commands, affirming only the modal status thesis. Nevertheless, given the power of the Anscombe intuition about the distinctive character of moral obligations, it still seems plausible that something important is left out by the natural law theorist who does not bring God's commands into the story. It would still seem God's commands, even if we reject discretion, add an important dimension of authority to the moral character of what he commands. His commands would furnish powerful new reasons for performing various acts. One may hold then that the content of what God commands is circumscribed by the created natures he has chosen to give things, but still hold that what one might call the preceptorial force of the morally right is due to God's commands.²²

22. Evans adds that, given the normative principles that undergird a claim that God has divine authority, it seems odd for a theistic natural law theorist to hold that God's commands add no new moral character to what is commanded. The divine command theorist certainly can acknowledge that we may have good reasons to perform those acts that are our moral obligations, even if God had not commanded them. The defender of a divine command theory just insists that those reasons do not capture everything that is required for an act to be a moral obligation.

As we discussed in Chapter 5, moral obligations, robustly and classically construed, are authoritative, and they are an odd fit in a naturalistic world. Mackie saw this, Joyce and Sartre and many other naturalists too, and many of them have given up acting as though God's (assumed) death has no implications. They are unwilling to water the concept of moral obligations down to something more domesticated; furthermore, they are willing to bite the proverbial bullet, embrace the implications of their worldview, and eschew objective moral obligations.

The authority of moral obligations needs an account; the Anscombe intuition requires explanation. Theism—entailing a loving, perfect God who commands, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who knows truly what is in our ultimate best interest, and who desires the best for us—can, we submit, most effectively provide it. Little wonder Plantinga thinks a moral argument on the basis of objective moral obligations is the best piece of natural theology available, and that Craig reports that this is the most persuasive argument he presents on college campuses.

Moral Knowledge

Richard Joyce echoes the case that the success of evolutionary moral psychology provides a stiff challenge to naturalistic ethics by explaining the formation of our moral beliefs without reference to their truth. He then adds, “And to the extent that the naturalist can make her case, non-naturalism and supernaturalism become less plausible. But if the naturalist cannot make her case, Harman’s challenge seems to make non-naturalism and supernaturalism obsolete. In other words: Once we have a complete nonmoral genealogy of moral judgment, if moral naturalism succeeds non-naturalism and supernaturalism are sunk, and if moral naturalism fails non-naturalism and supernaturalism are sunk. Thus non-naturalism and supernaturalism suffer most in this argumentative fray, whereas the moral naturalist is defeated only through independent arguments having nothing in particular to do” with the evolutionary debunking arguments.²³

Although we are deeply convinced by much of Joyce’s criticism of secular ethics, we are considerably less convinced by his critique of moral knowledge when we assume, for purposes of discussion, moral realism. The debunking arguments tend to assume our moral beliefs are false, or

23. Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 210.

at least that there is no particularly good reason for thinking them true, which is what “makes it clear that if there is a psychological mechanism devoted to producing these sorts of beliefs, that mechanism is unreliable,” as Wielenberg puts it.²⁴ But if we can assume something like that, Wielenberg asks, why bother with evolutionary debunking at all? Joyce is right to say more of the epistemic story needs to be told, but wrong, we think, in assuming it can’t be done.

As we saw, Enoch and Wielenberg each provide a third factor approach to answer the challenge of the debunkers, approaches not without merit. Again, a third factor avoids the need for a direct tracking account; the correlation between moral truth and belief is instead explained by appeal to a third factor responsible for both. The problem with Wielenberg’s account, we noted, was that it is based on what we consider to be a deficient and watered-down conception of rights and duties, even though it may still retain real potential. Regarding Enoch’s approach, we would point out that it is deeply consistent with robust classical theism, arguably more so than with his own robust realism. For classical theists too would affirm that human beings have value, that (at least roughly speaking) their survival (indeed, their flourishing) is a moral good, and thus that (again, roughly speaking) the trajectory of evolution could certainly conduce to something morally good.

Indeed, Enoch denies that his thesis requires that human survival is of ultimate or even intrinsic value, but surely his case is made stronger if human survival and thriving *are* of intrinsic value. In an earlier chapter we discussed the issue of intrinsic human value at length, arguing that various secular accounts of morality face a formidable challenge accounting for such a reality well. Here we have argued that classical theism and Christianity can explain it better, which, if we’re right, would mean that we can deploy Enoch’s approach ourselves and do so even more effectively, predicated on a yet more robust account of intrinsic human value than is likely to be generated by secular ethics.

Angus Ritchie, in a different way, argues that theism can provide a better explanation of the reliability of our moral cognitive processes, a more direct tracking account. It is a deeply teleological account of moral knowledge, based on an intentional explanation of our belief-generating and belief-evaluating capacities that track objective moral truth. He terms

24. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, p. 158.

this tracking phenomenon “Y,” and the theistic explanation he offers goes like this:

- 1) God knew the occurrence of Y would be (objectively) valuable, so
- 2) God had good reason to bring about Y, which explains why
- 3) God wanted to bring about Y. (3), taken together with
- 4) God knew that the best means to bring about Y involved actions {a, b, c . . .}, and
- 5) God had the power to take actions {a, b, c . . .}, explains why
- 6) God took actions {a, b, c . . .}, which explains, given (4), why
- 7) Y occurred.²⁵

Ritchie writes,

The theist need not deny that the processes described by evolutionary biology explain the generation of human convictions about ethics, and their capacity to reason about these convictions and refine them. All that the theist needs to add to the account given by evolutionary biology is the claim that the world is providentially ordered so that the interaction of the quasi-teleological process of natural selection and of the spandrel-like features it generates yield an outcome which enables human beings to apprehend that which of objective value.²⁶

The appeal to divine intentions to account for the truth-tracking ability of our moral faculties requires further analysis, remaining a promissory note and framework in need of fleshing out—a project for another day—but it possesses great potential, in our view. The intentionality and intelligence of a personalist account of reality enables the richer teleology that can better provide an account of moral knowledge.

So a variety of options is available here: either a third factor approach that avoids the debunking challenge constituting a defeater, or a theistic and teleological tracking account. Not only can theism affirm robust moral knowledge; it can also explain such knowledge, and the moral truth on which it is predicated, better than can secular ethicists. As Ritchie writes,

25. Ritchie, *From Morality to Metaphysics*, p. 164.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

his book is an argument “that classical theism can provide a good explanation for this phenomenon” (the capacity of human beings to cognize an objective moral order), and “it is highly *unlikely* our belief-generating and belief-evaluating capacities . . . would track the objective moral order in a purposeless universe.”²⁷

Again, following Ritchie, we think it important to distinguish moral knowledge from *the explanation* of such knowledge. Most human beings, representing all sorts of different worldviews, know a great many moral truths already; this is, in fact, what makes the moral argument hold such broad appeal. But having moral knowledge is not the same as explaining *how* with the resources available in one’s worldview; on this score, not all worldviews are equally successful.

Having thus discussed issues of moral metaphysics and epistemology, we turn to the two dimensions of Kantian moral faith, starting with the need to address Spener’s problem of how to become not just better people, but new people.

Moral Transformation

The performative challenge facing secular ethics is to close the moral gap. In light of the high moral demand and our limited capacities, how can such a gaping chasm be crossed? The account of theism and Christianity is that divine assistance is available to help us do what we otherwise could not do on our own. This includes, ultimately, becoming entirely conformed to the image of Christ by the work of God’s sanctifying and glorifying grace, delivered completely from the power of sin—the truest freedom of all.

Recall Lewis’s image of morality as a fleet of ships. Each ship must be individually seaworthy, the ships have to coordinate their efforts at navigation to avoid running into each other, and the fleet needs a destination. Consider each moral analogue: first, each of us is in need of radical moral transformation, deliverance from entrenched selfishness and self-aggrandizement into a state of perfect love. Without confidence in divine assistance, how could we rationally be fully committed to the moral enterprise, knowing our best efforts would be futile? Christianity, in its full-fledged soteriology, offers more than the prospect of vague resemblance of Christ, but complete conformity to his image. The process of

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 175, 177.

transformation is holistic and organic, by which we are not just forgiven for our sins, but delivered from their power; the very life of God takes up residence within us. Real, deep, lasting moral transformation takes place, a revolution of the will, by which we become not just better men, but new men. Indeed, ultimately moral perfection is within reach—holiness, in Kant's sense—and obedience to the command to be holy as God is holy. Although this is not something we can effect on our own, it is something that God can accomplish for and in us, so long as he has our cooperation.

God's love and our transformation are closely related. It is God's love for us, and consequent desire for what is best for us, that lead to his completing the work of salvation within us. This puts the lie to any notion of love as simply permissive capitulation to whatever moral state the beloved happens to be in. God loves us as we are, surely, but the very fact that he loves us entails the need for our transformation to experience the sort of complete fellowship with him and others for which we were intended. The process of transformation can be, we are told, exceedingly painful; C. S. Lewis used the analogy of a dentist who won't stop his drilling until the work is done; another time, Lewis spoke of metal toy soldiers coming to life, a process that the toys themselves would likely not understand and even more likely not enjoy. Nagel has it wrong, if Lewis is right; it's not the universe waking up and coming to life. It's us.

Second, collectively, too, we have to progress morally, as cultures and societies. More than just getting along, morality demands deep cultural transformation. On this issue, Paul Copan adds a dimension of *history* to the moral argument, writing that we can strengthen “the moral argument by looking to world history to see the powerful and very clear connection between faithful Bible-followers and the transformation of communities—indeed, Western civilization.”²⁸ Specific cultural developments can be shown to have flowed from the Jewish-Christian worldview, leading to societies that are “progress-prone rather than progress-resistant,” including such signs of progress as the founding of modern science, poverty-diminishing free markets, equal rights for all before the law, religious liberty, women's suffrage, human rights initiatives, and the abolition of slavery, widow-burning, and foot-binding.²⁹ He makes the case that

28. See Paul Copan, “Reinforcing the Moral Argument: Appealing to the Historical Impact of the Christian Faith,” unpublished paper.

29. Ibid.

two Christian convictions are at the root of this transformation: first, the notion that every human being has dignity and worth, having been made in the image of God; and, second, that God has raised Jesus from the dead to create a new, transformed humanity in Christ. The historical case that Christianity has predominantly been a force for good is impressive, and we won't reproduce it here, but it adds another important angle of the moral argument that is often ignored.³⁰

Copan concludes that scholars of all stripes recognize that the world would be a much different, and profoundly impoverished, place—morally, spiritually, and socially—with the historical Jesus and the dedication of his faithful, transformed followers living out an uncompromising faith in a challenging and often hostile world. “And it is this practical matter of transformed lives and communities—of lights brightly shining in darkness (Mt. 5:16)—that puts flesh and bones on the moral argument that connects God to moral duties and human dignity.”³¹

Returning now to Lewis's fleet analogy, the third component of morality is a moral goal or destination. As human beings, this pertains, once more, to what we were made for, the sort of creatures we are, which speaks to the issue of our essence and *telos*. Whereas secular ethics struggles to make sense of such concepts on a mechanistic view of reality and the human condition, with very limited success, such concepts fit comfortably into a theistic vision of reality.

Alvin Plantinga once fleshed out such a view while delineating ways in which Christian and secular philosophical perspectives diverge:

... How should we think about human persons? What sorts of things, fundamentally, are they? What is it to be a person, what is it

30. Even the outspoken atheist Jürgen Habermas acknowledges this inescapable and profound debt human rights discourse today owes to the biblical worldview: “Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and a social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.” See Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, ed. and trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 150–151.

31. Copan, “Reinforcing the Moral Argument.”

to be a human person, and how shall we think about personhood? How, in particular, should Christians, Christian philosophers, think about these things? The first point to note is that on the Christian scheme of things, God is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. God, furthermore, has created man in his own image; we men and women are image bearers of God, and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him. How we think about God, then, will have an immediate and direct bearing on how we think about humankind.³²

Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that insofar as a virtue ethic is teleological, it requires “at least one central functional concept, the concept of man understood as having an essential nature and an essential purpose or function.”³³ David Hull, anticipating the central thesis of Scott Smith’s recent book devoted to this topic, argued that naturalism cannot provide an account for this. Hull inferred that in light of the impersonal, atomistic world of naturalism, there is no space for metaphysically robust concepts like “human nature,” writing,

The implications of moving species from the metaphysical category that can appropriately be characterized in terms of “natures” to a category for which such characterizations are inappropriate are extensive and fundamental. If species evolve in anything like the way that Darwin thought they did, then they cannot possibly have the sort of natures that traditional philosophers claimed they did. If species in general lack natures, then so does *Homo sapiens* as a biological species. If *Homo sapiens* lacks a nature, then no reference to biology can be made to support one’s claims about “human nature.” Perhaps all people are “persons,” share the same “personhood,” etc., but such claims must be explicated and defended with no reference to biology. Because so many moral, ethical, and political theories depend on some notion or other of human

32. Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1984): 264–265.

33. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 69.

nature, Darwin's theory brought into question all these theories. The implications are not entailments. One can always dissociate *Homo sapiens* from "human being," but the result is a much less plausible position.³⁴

The Platonists among the atheists seem to be on firmer footing, but only by pushing toward a view of reality more congenial to theism, a richer ontology beyond what naturalism can allow. Again, the claim we are making here is weaker than Hull's or Smith's; we are not denying the possibility of a human essence and *telos* on naturalism and secularism, but simply that theism provides the considerably better, indeed best, explanation of them.³⁵

Theism provides warrant for the first dimension of Kantian moral faith: the hope for moral transformation. What of the second dimension, whether virtue and joy can be wed? To this issue we turn.

Happiness and Virtue

Kant saw that happiness and virtue need to cohere for morality to be a fully rational enterprise, but he remained steadfastly dubious of self-interest as a legitimate moral motivation. What Kant requires is that moral duty and motivation should be completely compartmentalized from the postulates that make it possible to do our duty to work to advance the highest good.

34. David L. Hull, *The Metaphysics of Evolution*, in SUNY Series in Philosophy and Biology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 75.

35. Through sheer dint of effort, the secular moralist can, whatever the odds of success, commit to the moral life, but William James once memorably pointed out a qualitative difference between such a person and the Christian (while illustrating once more his refusal to reduce religion to morality): "Morality pure and simple accepts the law of the whole which it finds reigning, so far as to acknowledge and obey it, but it may obey it with the heaviest and coldest heart, and never cease to feel it as a yoke. . . . It makes a tremendous emotional and practical difference to one whether one accepts the universe in the drab way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints. The difference is as great as that between passivity and activity, and that between the defensive and the aggressive mood. . . . If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce. It ought to mean nothing short of this reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes. . . . This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion." See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1902), pp. 41–42.

Belief in God and the hope for a happiness that corresponds to virtue must be quarantined, as it were, from the reasons for doing our duty lest our principles be infected with motivation that will altogether destroy their moral worth.

We find Kant's insistence that belief in God and the hope for the highest good must not enter into our moral motivation to be highly artificial if not psychologically impossible to follow. By contrast, our view, which recognizes a necessarily loving and perfectly good God as the ultimate ground of morality, can readily explain moral obligation's perfect alignment with ultimate self-interest, and thereby show that morality is fully rational in the sense that concerned both Kant and Sidgwick. Moreover, by recognizing the necessity of God to ground morality all along, we can avoid the artificial construct Kant tried to maintain to preserve what he believed was the essence of true moral motivation. As theists we don't accept the maxim of doing duty for duty's sake alone, but out of obedience to a perfectly loving God and out of a character conformed to the image of that God, a character that increasingly loves what God loves.

Indeed, the highest moral motivation is not merely duty to obey moral principles that our reason discerns to be true. Rather, it is love for a Person who supremely deserves our love not only because he is holy, but also because he intensely loves us, desires our well-being, and has acted out of that love to make that well-being possible and, in time, to set the world entirely aright. The promotion of our own well-being and self-interest is integral to loving such a God; indeed, it is the inevitable result of our true love, so the conflict that Kant feared between genuine moral principles and acting to promote our self-interest simply dissolves. The classic conflict between self-interest and altruism is a genuine dilemma for naturalists and secular ethicists, but has no traction for theism and Christianity.³⁶

Indeed, the distinctively Christian doctrine of the Trinity provides particularly rich resources for addressing this issue, for according to that

36. We stop short of affirming John Piper's Christian hedonism. We see his view as involving four components. Let us call the *satisfaction principle* the notion that our highest joy and fulfillment comes from a loving and healthy relationship with God. We have no qualms with such a claim, because we think it is true and biblical. Let us dub the *permissibility thesis* the notion that the happiness or pleasure that comes from a relationship with God is a legitimate form of moral and spiritual motivation. We also agree with this. The *obligation principle* is the further idea that we are obligated to be motivated by the desire for the pleasure that comes from our relationship with God and others. We think this principle is false. Call the *ultimacy principle* Piper's claim that the desire for the joy that comes from loving and serving God constitutes our highest moral and spiritual motivation. This claim, too, is false.

doctrine, ultimate reality is a mutually loving relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If this is true, the highest reaches of love and goodness are not defined by a sacrifice that desires nothing in return, for the eternal pattern of perfect love is one of reciprocal giving and receiving. The practical upshot is momentous, albeit paradoxical. If Trinitarian love is primordial reality, we can never advance our true self-interest by selfish behavior, but when we selflessly return love to the God of perfect love—one form of which consists of love for other human beings—we thereby inevitably promote our own ultimate well-being and highest happiness.³⁷

Beauty and Truth

Thomas Nagel has admitted that he doesn't want the world to be a theistic one. Something about it grates against his aesthetic sensibilities. In Chapter 1, we tried to show that Lewis had already anticipated and answered one of Nagel's aesthetic challenges. Now we wish to extend that case by submitting that the theistic vision of reality we have depicted is not only reasonably thought to be true, including for reasons we have tried to outline here, but also deeply beautiful, and in different senses. Once more, too, it is useful to recall that, if classical theism is true, we would expect nothing less than its resplendent beauty, and the satisfaction of such aesthetic conditions to be evidentially significant.

First, the fourfold case from morality is an elegant argument, not owing to our presentation, but because of its own inner logic and structure. Its constituent pieces, though diverse, cohere into an organic unity with remarkable proficiency. The integration of disparate pieces of evidence, fitting into one another like Russian nesting dolls, bolsters Plato's idea that the Good and the Beautiful are ultimately one and the same. Considerations of human dignity dovetail with commitments to meaningful agency, which is a necessary part of the moral transformation process. That process culminates in the sort of goodness on which the theory of obligations rests. The ultimate freedom includes the sort of goodness that makes clear the contrasting but parasitic reality of badness, made all the more evil by misuse of free will. Objective perfect

37. For more on this, see Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 188–193.

moral obligations correlate with nonnegotiable moral rights and the human dignity and worth resulting from the one in whose image we are made.

The divine loom weaves together the warp of moral ontology with the weft of moral knowledge and, by turns, the taut threads of moral faith. To vary the metaphor, in the same way that a labyrinthine maze of jumbled metal filings suddenly stands in symmetrical formation in response to the pull of a magnet, likewise, the right organizing story—classical theism and orthodox Christianity—pulls all the moral pieces of evidence into alignment and allows a striking pattern to emerge.

Again, the result is like a portrait whose details manifest adept artistry, a beautiful tapestry knitted together with meticulous care, an image with lines and shapes and colors whose initially inchoate significance is fully grasped only when by converging they collectively come to fruition and begin to speak with one voice. Out of a variegated pattern, one of stunning simplicity emerges on the other side of complexity, any and all puzzling features along the way explained together, now making perfect sense in a fully satisfying denouement.

As a result, the cumulative, abductive, teleological case that we make for theism features not only the explanatory advantages of each individual part, but also the added epistemic merit of a package that deeply coheres and together constitutes a compelling organic whole.³⁸ Theism provides the necessary explanations, we have argued, better than its alternatives. This is evidentially significant, and it is also, we submit, intuitively, intellectually, and aesthetically satisfying.

The second aesthetic advantage of theism that features a perfectly loving God is the sheer beauty of the picture that emerges. Christianity, of course, is a religion of soaring hope. It urges us to indulge and enlarge those hopes, promising happiness and fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams. Reality, on a Christian picture, is far more wonderful than we have yet to discover, more beautiful than we can even conceive.

38. By the way, there is no objectionable “God of the gaps” charge if the arguments provided are based on what we *do* know, rather than what we *don’t*; we know (or at least justifiably think we know) that intrinsic human dignity, binding moral obligations, nonnegotiable human rights, meaningful agency, redemption of evil, profound moral transformation, and the rationality of morality are real and significant. We know, too, that they all require robust explanation—an integrated account that follows naturally from the core commitments of a worldview.

By glaring contrast, we were recently struck by these lines from Nagel's remarkable *Mind and Cosmos*, a book we discussed in Chapter 1:

The conflict between scientific naturalism and various forms of antireductionism is a staple of recent philosophy. On one side there is the hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology. On the other side are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought, and value can be accommodated in a universe consisting at the most basic level of physical facts—facts, however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences.³⁹

Nagel himself is a committed atheist, but he is highly dubious of the dogma that all of reality can be explained in terms of the physical sciences. Indeed, the aspects of reality most interesting and immediately accessible to us are the very features of reality that resist scientific explanation, things like consciousness, reason, and objective moral truths.

But here is what struck us. Notice in particular this line: ". . . there is the hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences. . . ." This gives us considerable pause. Even if the word *hope* is used here with something less than its full emotional force, we wonder how anyone can hope the naturalistic picture of reality is true.

To be clear, we can, at one level, understand regretful atheism. We can empathize with those who reluctantly come to the conclusion that God does not exist, that it's all matter and energy, determined by mindless, heartless laws of nature, that the same laws of nature that somehow generated human life will eventually destroy all of us as the stars burn out and the physical remains of the universe go on expanding and disintegrating forever.

But what we cannot understand is why anyone would *prefer* this vision of reality and *hope* for its confirmation or vindication. It is one thing regrettably to come to this conclusion; it is quite another to enthusiastically embrace it. It is one thing to believe death is stronger than love, and will get the last word. It is another thing altogether to hope that is the case. To celebrate such a vision of reality with a sort of triumph makes no rational sense. Indeed, it is arguably perverse.

39. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, p. 13.

Of course, many atheists contend that the problem of evil has driven them to the conclusion that God does not exist. Again, we respect the force of this problem, and understand those who find it hard to believe in God in the face of devastating evil; *not to* struggle with evil is practically inhuman. But it is another matter altogether to wield the problem of evil like an axe with a sense of sneering triumph. Those who do this seem to have lost sight of the tragic implications of their claims for the very victims of suffering and evil on whose behalf they profess to speak.

When we encounter this sort of disdainful atheism, we are always reminded of an argument Richard Creel advanced several years ago that we have a moral obligation at least to hope that God exists. Why hope that God exists? Creel asks. Precisely because of compassion for those who suffer. If it is even possible to retain the hope that God exists, he argues, then it is possible to hope that the terrible suffering in our world can be redeemed. If there is no God, there is no hope for those who have suffered terrible evil and injustice, whose lives were cut painfully short.⁴⁰

Evil and good are locked in combat, but they are not equal and opposite. Evil is awful indeed, but Christianity tells us that it is not ultimate, but rather a twisted, distorted version of the real thing, a counterfeit, real indeed, but still penultimate. If it were ultimate, this life would be a tragedy, the most horrific of suffering would stand beyond redemption's reach, hope for a new day or even a revolution of the will would be futile. Evil would win, and a cosmos in ruins would be the inexorable climax of its narrative. All those countless anonymous persons who have suffered horribly would be consigned to oblivion. Reality itself would write them off as monuments to the tragic absurdity of life.

We will not write them off, for we have reason to believe that the final shape of the cosmic drama is altogether different. The evidence of morality points to goodness as primordial, and exposes evil as only a parasite, a perversion of the good that will inevitably be defeated. The good God to whom morality points can be trusted to bring the human drama to a joyous end in which justice is effected, even the most horrific suffering is redeemed, and holy love is the enduring reality. Morality bids us not only to hope for such an end, but to believe our hope will not be disappointed.

40. Richard Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 147, 149.

Conclusion

AS OUR EXPLORATION draws to a close, perhaps it would be worthwhile to summarize some of our main points. We have argued that morality is a signpost, a clue, a roadmap to reality. Its diverse and distinctive features are evidential, because they are best explained not by naturalism and secularism and atheism, but rather by classical theism, and even more particularly, by features specific to Christian theology. From epistemic to ontological matters, and from the rationality of morality to the need for radical moral transformation, secular ethical theories seem ill suited to the task of accounting for such realities fully and satisfactorily. Since they can avail themselves of the rich resources of this world, they are not without some measure of explanatory power; but God and cosmos together can provide the resources for a better and more robust account of morality and its various dimensions. This, at any rate, is what we have attempted to argue.

The cosmos is utterly amazing. From the shores of the cosmic ocean, we can canvass its astonishing facets one after the next, from the seemingly infinite to the immeasurably infinitesimal, from quarks and black holes to supernovas and gluons. The universe is truly something nearly beyond our comprehension in its vastness and complexity; it deserves both our wonder and awe. But we think perspicacious the sentiment of Immanuel Kant when he wrote, “Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” Indeed, the moral law may well be the more revelatory of reality of the two. The universe shows dazzling artistry, to be sure, but morality potentially something more personal.

We believe in a cosmos within, a world of infinite richness, where truth and goodness and beauty merge and dance and sing. If morality is an intimation of the real, a veridical glimpse into the true nature of reality, it reveals a Goodness that cares for us, that loves us, that pursues us, and that is worth pursuing. Ethical truth is more than the mental grimace of passion, as Santayana once put it, “the inevitable and hygienic bias of one race of animals.”¹ Morality reveals ultimate reality to be personal. If this is true, there can hardly be a more important truth; if there is a robust account of human value, of a human *telos*, of the death of death, of authoritative obligations, of hope for a revolution of the will, of complete consistency between morality and rationality, we have every reason to try finding this out.

Swallowing us in its vastness, the universe nearly renders us lost, insignificant specks on an unspeakably gargantuan canvas, before moral truth rings in our ears with its own eternal notes, infinite intonations that whisper in our hearts a message that salvages significance and imbues us with dignity and value once more. The universe is not ultimately about mere space and time, matter and energy, but about verities of good and evil, right and wrong, vice and virtue; reality has a moral taste to it, a running grain, and bids us to conduct our lives with it rather than against.

Morality, like the universe itself, points beyond itself to something greater. As much as both of these pressing, poignant realities mesmerize and captivate our attention, from both above and within, how much greater is their ultimate source likely to be?

If the starry heavens above and the moral law within were the ultimate reality, suggestive of nothing more, metaphysical dead ends, then it would be a foolhardy mistake to look beyond them for something else, and any encouragement to do so would manifestly qualify as wishful thinking. But if instead they are echoes of the eternal, meant as windows of insight into a yet deeper reality, it is nothing less than perverse to stop short and shut out such signals and notes of transcendence ringing in our ears. If the meaning for which our hearts yearn is there for us to discern, if the trio of transcendentals is beckoning for us to partake, if a brook with water that forever quenches our deepest thirst is there for us to enjoy, who in their right mind would turn away?

1. George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine and Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), pp. 152, 274.

On Christmas Day, 2014, Neil deGrasse Tyson, host of the rebooted *Cosmos* series and an agnostic, tweeted this: “On this day long ago, a child was born who, by age 30, would transform the world. Happy Birthday Isaac Newton b. Dec 25, 1642.”

Isaac Newton, of course, was a profoundly religious person and professing Christian, a fact conveniently ignored in Tyson’s playfully mischievous subtext. The same is true of a whole slew of pillars of modern science: from Kepler to Copernicus, from Galileo to Boyle to Faraday. Earlier in the book we made mention of the theological presuppositions that functioned at the foundation of science. Even noted physicist Paul Davies, though not a believer himself, highlights this science-Christianity connection: “Science began as an outgrowth of theology, and all scientists, whether atheists or theists . . . accept an essentially theological worldview.”²

Thomas Nagel, as we have seen, conjectures that the universe is waking up, that latent within it somehow are the seeds that would sprout into consciousness and intentionality and value. This is his effort to generate teleology without personhood. He is not sure his view makes sense, but he thinks it’s the direction to look. Particularly interesting for our concerns is that this phenomenon of the universe waking up generates the emergence of beings who can discern objective moral truth and make true moral judgments.

Here it is worthwhile to compare the scenario C. S. Lewis imagines in *The Abolition of Man* that we considered in Chapter 8. Recall that Lewis imagines sometime in the future in which the science of eugenics has been perfected, and the “conditioners” have to decide what sort of conscience and moral nature they will breed into their subjects. In this scenario as Lewis pictures it, the conditioners have stepped outside the *Tao* and are no longer guided by objective moral truth. In this situation, Lewis suggests, they would follow their strongest desires, and thereby nature would rule, and the result would be the end of man as a rational moral creature. That is what he calls “the abolition of man.” Consider especially this passage from Lewis, in light of Nagel’s awakening universe.

If the fully planned and conditioned world (with its *Tao* a mere product of planning) comes into existence, Nature will be troubled no more by the restive species that rose in revolt against her so

2. Paul Davies, *Are We Alone?* (New York: Basic, 1995), p. 96.

many millions of years ago, will be vexed no more by its chatter of truth and mercy and beauty and happiness.... and if the eugenics are efficient enough there will be no second revolt, but all snug beneath the Conditioners, and the conditioners beneath her, till the moon falls or the sun grows cold.³

WHAT IS SUGGESTIVE here is that Lewis's scenario of a universe becoming desensitized, falling asleep, and finally dying, is the opposite of Nagel's scenario of a universe waking up and becoming conscious of truth, beauty, and goodness. But notice in particular: an absolutely essential component of a universe whose human inhabitants are fully alive, and indeed fully human, is an awareness of moral truth and goodness. So here is the question we want to pose in view of these scenarios: how can we do justice to Nagel's insight about meaning, purpose, and value; how can we best account for the moral truth and goodness that is essential to humanity and the very meaning of our lives?

What seems to us the considerably better explanation is that personhood and goodness were there all along. Goodness did not emerge and come to be, but was the starting point, what began the whole process, and will bring it to fruition. In light of the irreducibly personal nature of a human *telos*, a personal God makes better sense of morality than abstract Platonic principles, the trajectory of naturalistic evolution, or Nagel's emergent teleology. Glen Tinder writes,

Aside from the ultimate, indefeasible reality of transcendence, the most significant disclosure that comes to us from the side of transcendence concerns the character of transcendence: that it is deeply and entirely personal. It is not the kind of reality we can observe, comprehend, and master; rather, we must hear, listen, and respond. It is arguable that only when envisioned as a person—as a "Thou"—does transcendence wholly correspond with our needs. Once personality has come to light it is seen, under the authority of an irresistible intuition, as morally prior to everything impersonal. Having become cognizant of the personal, the only realities we can think of as valuable beyond measure and therefore as intrinsically ends in themselves, are those we can love and trust, listen to and

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 68.

address. Impersonal realities are properly at our disposal; we can use them as we please, or ignore them. Hence transcendence cannot fully quench our dissatisfaction with the finite and temporal if it is nothing more than a very large and splendid object, like a cathedral. It must come to us as the kind of reality that might be a friend and companion, that might speak and listen. It seems likely that the impersonal transcendence which concepts like “the idea of the Good” and “the unmoved mover” invoke, could be completely satisfying only in a civilization which, like ancient Greece, had not fully awakened to the personal dimension of reality. And one can think that efforts in our time to return to pagan impersonality, as in philosophies centered on “the Absolute” and “being-in-itself,” put human personality at risk by according prior value to the impersonal dimensions of the universe.⁴

According to Christian thought, which resonates with what a natural theological examination of morality reveals, God is the creator, the one in whose image we have been made, whose character is perfect love. The world has gone terribly wrong, but he is in the process of setting it right. Just as he created the cosmos, he is recreating human beings as they were intended to be, reconciled to him and conformed to his image. Ultimately how we live and who we are is no mere matter of morality, but of holiness and love, living in freedom from sin and death, loving God and neighbor with all our hearts. Resurrection living is the sort of existence for which we were made.

This sort of personal view of ultimate reality also gives us hope that the problem of evil will finally admit of an answer, reconciling honesty about the badness of evil with a genuine hope true to the facts. According to Christian thought, the evil that humans do—our failure to live up to the moral law—is integrated with the enslavement of creation itself. There is no isomorphic, one-to-one correspondence between cause and effect, but “there is a nexus, a web of rippling events that spreads out from human rebellion against the Creator to the out-of-jointness of creation itself,” as N. T. Wright puts it. The cosmos itself, as glorious as it is, falls far short of its potential, fraught with brokenness and death and darkness.

The good news is that God’s justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice, because “the God to whom justice belongs is the Creator God who has

4. Glen Tinder, *The Fabric of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 34–35.

yet to complete his original plan for creation and whose justice is designed not simply to restore balance to a world out of kilter but to bring to glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility that he made in the first place.”⁵

The claim that the one to whom justice belongs is the Creator God who has such a purpose for his creation is a matter of extraordinary significance. Again, the belief that morality has such a remarkable source that grounds and guarantees its authority has far-reaching implications of truly cosmic import. To see the cosmos in its proper dependence relation to its transcendent Creator enables us more truly to see its immeasurable value as the ordered and providential reality that it is. Not only is moral truth at the heart of human meaning, it is an essential part of the script for the whole world. And that is why we have not tired of insisting that the deepest truths about reality are discerned not through the cosmos alone, but rather, through the nature and will of the good God who is its ultimate source, final end, and relentless lover.

5. N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), p. 64.

Index

Abduction, 15, 77, 274

Abductive moral arguments, 54–78; anti-Platonist moral argument, 60–63; deductive argument, 63–71; deductive argument, critique of, 71–78; facts explained by, 113; God, question of perfection of, 55–60; overview of, 54–55. *See also* Inference to the best explanation

Abegg, E., 30, 58

Abolition of man, 305–306

The Abolition of Man (Lewis), 244, 305

Abortion, of Down Syndrome children, 273

Absolute truths, pragmatists' aversion to, 31

Absolutism, James's renunciation of, 35–36n21, 64

Actions: anti-realism on, 172; conscious control of, 106; as ends in themselves, 134; internalism on, 168–169; moral realism on, 170–171; obligations as good actions, 247; reason internalism and, 173–174; resulting from moral obligations, 176–177; right and wrong, 147

Adams, Marilyn, 12n1, 57n6, 78, 165, 280

Adams, Robert Merrihew: on epistemology, 204; on goodness, 135, 287; on good reasons, sensitivity to, 175; on guilt, 150; on hypothetical observers, 162–163; on moral obligations, 151, 177; on moral truths, God and, 61; on social requirement theory, 74

Adaptive link account (of moral beliefs), 201

Adaptive unconscious, 188

Affections, objective moral truth and, 247

Against Moral Responsibility (Waller), 98–101, 103–104

Agents and agency: agent internalism, 168n22; free will and, 277; human agency, naturalism's difficulty with, 283; moral agency, 90, 218, 283n9; moral duties of agents, 170–171; source of actions of agents, 106–107. *See also* Morality

Alienation from others, as feature of guilt, 150

Alone in the cosmos. *See* Naturalism

Alston, William, 192

Alternative possibilities, principle of, 106–107

Altruism, 155, 160, 248, 298. *See also* Virtue

“An Awareness of What Is Missing” (Habermas), 233

Anaximenes (philosopher), 26

Ancient Greeks, gods of, 60

Ancient Israelites, God of, 57–58

Animals: empathy in, 155;oughtness of, 126; primates, 156, 157, 162; schema of natural normativity of, 127–128

Annihilation tests, 134n20

Anscombe, G. E. M., 126, 152

Anscombe intuition, 152, 153, 164, 208, 289, 290

Anselmian Explorations (Morris), 61

Anselmianism, 59, 64, 71

Anti-essentialism, 31, 165n17

Anti-Platonist moral argument (APMA), 60–63

Anti-realism, moral, 3

Antony, Louise, 66

Apologia. *See* Moral apologetics

Appraiser internalism, 168n22

Aquinas, Thomas, 166

Arbitrariness, Ockhamistic voluntarism and, 12

Aristotelian categoricals, 124–132, 212n39

Aristotle: on actions, 134; divine, considerations of, 33; as ethical naturalist, 166; on moral judgments, 229; on the natural, 212n39; on obligations, 152; on Thales, 26; value of ethical theories of, 74

Arnhart, Larry, 125

Arnold, Matthew, 23

“Arriving at Perfection” (Franklin), 216

Art: perfection and, 235–236; unity of, 50–51

Astonishing Hypothesis, 140

A-supervenience, 135

Atheism: atheological premise, 62–63, 67–69; depiction in *God’s Not Dead*, 4; divisions within, 36, 38, 39; failures of arguments of, 71–72, 73; New Atheists, 32, 41, 59; as precursor to nihilism, 64, 65; regretful, 300–301.

See also Naturalism; Secularism

Augustine, St., on human need for God, 213

Auschwitz. *See* Holocaust

Authority: as component of morality, 149; of moral obligations, 151, 154, 169, 171, 174

Autobiography (Franklin), 216

Autonomy, 283

Axiology, moral (moral goodness), 165, 166–167, 196, 280–287

Axiomatic truths: agreement on existence of, 267; Kant on, 264; Lewis on, 244–246, 250; Sidgwick on, 259, 268, 269

Bacon, Francis, 28

Bad (evil) maxim, 218, 266

Baggett, David, 12n1, 133, 179, 287

Base properties, 134

Basic beliefs, 190–193

Baylor University, Plantinga-fest at, 145

Beauty, 2, 299–302

Beckett, Samuel, 38

Becoming new. *See* Moral transformation

Bees, morality of, 195–196

Being, relationship to goodness, 12

Being moral, 215

Beliefs: basic beliefs, 190–193; certainty of, 180–182; cognition and, 188–189; justification, truth, and belief (JTB), 189, 190, 194; justified moral beliefs, 203–204; justified true beliefs, 189–190; knowledge vs., 197; moral beliefs, 197, 291; normative beliefs, 207

Bentham, Jeremy, 121

Beowulf (epic poem), 256–257

Bergson, Henri, 42

Berkeley, George, 275

Bethke Elshtain, Jean, 118, 122n11

Bible: New Testament, 60, 295; Old Testament, portrayal of God in, 56–57

Biological goodness, 196

Bishop, Donald H., 35

Blackburn, Simon, 209

Blackmore, Susan, 141

Bloesch, Donald, 284

Bodies, as creators of health, 213

The Bonobo and the Atheist (de Waal), 155–156

Bonobos, moral building blocks of, 155

Bottles, perfection of, 57

Boyd, Richard, 163–164, 166, 203

Brink, David: anti-realism, rejection of, 172–173; as Cornell realist, 163–164; on moral obligations, 148, 167–171; on properties, moral vs. natural, 203; on reason internalism, 173–174; on reflective equilibrium, 187

Broad, C. D., 42

Brown, Claire, 17

Brown, Hunter, 192

Brute facts, 199, 286–287

Brute necessity, 138

Bugliosi, Vincent, 37

Business, purpose of, 5

Butler, Joseph, 119

Cabin in the Woods (Whedon), 243, 255

Calvin, John, and Calvinism, 16, 40

Cancer cells, flourishing of, 129–130

Care ethicists, 230n25

Care thinking, 229, 232

Cartesianism, 43, 180

“The Case for Christian Humanism” (Ritchie and Spencer), 284n12

Categorical imperatives, 148–149, 153, 167, 218, 229

Causation: causal chains, 106–107; causal closure, 136, 140, 141; making as, 137

Cave, Peter, 69

Censure, resulting from moral wrongdoing, 148

Certainty, justification and, 194

Chadwick, Owen, 28

Chalmers, David, 136

Change, pragmatists’ vision of, 31

Charity, impact on human dignity, 282

Children, 66, 195–197, 232, 273

Christian Humanist Manifesto (1982), 284

Christianity: Christian hedonism, 298n36; Christian humanists, 283–284; Christian movies, nature of, 5; evil in, 81–82; Habermas on, 295n30; historical, as nonabsolutist supernaturalism, 36n21; human dignity, impact on, 281–282; Lewis on, 221–222; on moral goodness, 165; moral transformation in, 293–294; nature of, 299; rise of, impact on naturalism, 27

Chronic diseases, 213–214

Church of England, Articles of 1571, 17

Civilized society, contracts in, 100

Clark, Tom, 101–104

Classical theism. *See* Theism

Clock time, scenarios on, 180–182, 194, 197

Cognition, 176n30, 188, 208, 210

Coincidence scenario, 181

Colby, Anne, 228

Comic vision of reality, 235

Compatibilism, 102, 106

Compositionism, 26

Comprehensive natural order (integrated worldview), 46, 47, 48, 52

“Confessions of an Ex-Moralist” (Marks), 68

Confidence, moral, 237

Conscious mind, adaptive unconscious vs., 188

Consciousness Explained (Dennett), 141

Consequentialism, 129
 Constrained maximizers, 234
 Constructivism, 133n19
 Context, for ethical decisions, 229
 Contracts, in civilized society, 100
 Copan, Paul, 294–295
 Cornell realists, 164–174, 203–204
 Correct assertability, 240
Cosmos (TV series), 305
 Counterfactuals, Darwinian, 205
 Counterpossibles, 67
 Craftsmen, goodness of, 288
 Craig, William Lane: deductive argument of, 63–70; deductive argument of, critique of, 71–78; on moral argument, 146; on objective moral obligations, 290; on objective moral truths, 60–61; Wielenberg's critique of, 143–144
 Creator God, 307–308
 Creel, Richard, 301
 Criminals, Waller on, 100
 Crisp, Roger, 209
 Criteria for narrowing, in IBE, 19–20
 Cruelty, need for explanation for wrongness of, 142–143
 Culpability, moral, 176n30
 Cultural transformation, 294–295
 Cumulativity, of moral argument, 274
 Damon, William, 228
 Darwin, Charles, 29, 29n7, 195, 196
 Darwinian counterfactuals, 205
Darwinian Natural Right (Arnhart), 125
 Darwin's Doubt, 200
 Davies, Paul, 305
 Dawkins, Richard, 32, 94–95, 273
 DCT. *See* Divine command theories
 Dear self, 219
 Death: end of, 81–82; of God, 29, 36–37; for a good cause, 245–250, 254–257, 267; objective moral truth and, 253; personhood and, 141
 Debunking arguments: evolutionary, ethical naturalists and, 202–205; moral knowledge and, 290–291; robust realism and, 205–209
 Decadence, 88
 Decency, 120
 Decision procedures, in utilitarianism, 122–123
 Deduction, 15, 54–55
 the Deductive argument (TDA): acrostic on objections to, 78n28; critique of, 71–78; discussion of, 63–71; problems of, 77–78; summary of, 76–77
 Defects, moral, 126
 Deflationary fallacy and analysis, 32–36, 65, 131
 Deism, Flew's, 11
 Democritus (philosopher), 26, 37–38, 49
 Dennett, Daniel: on causal closure of the physical, 141; critiques of, 101–104, 108; on intentional stance, 141; on just desserts, language of, 100, 277–278; on Madoff, 107–109; as New Atheist, 32; on promises, 100, 105; on teleology under naturalism, 284; Waller, critique of, 98–101, 103–104, 107–108
 Deontic concepts, 147, 220. *See also* Kant, Immanuel; Moral obligations; Obligations
 DePaul, Michael R., 135
 Depravity, 234
 Derivationism, 287n18
 Desirable consciousness, 257–258
 Despair, moral, 238–239
 Desserts. *See* Punishment
 Destruction, joy in, 89
 Determinism, 105–106, 277–278
 De Waal, Frans, 155–158, 198
 Dewey, John, 29, 30, 34
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Hume), 84–85

Dice, McGrew on rolling, 78n28
Dionysianism, 89
Direct reference theory, 164–165
Discontinuous properties, 138
Discretion, 230n25, 289
Discursive knowledge, 181, 183–188
Diseases, chronic, 213–214
Divine command theories
 (DCT): Anselmianism and, 67; authors' preference for, 287; basis in theistic foundation of goodness, 289; description of, 6; Evans on, 166; on moral obligations, 289n22; Sinnott-Armstrong on, 66
Divine motivation theory, 75, 139
Divinities (deities), God, comparison with, 7–8
Divinity of Doubt (Bugliosi), 37
Doctors, relationship to health, 213
The Doctrine of Virtue (Kant), 230n25
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 5–6, 38
Doubt, nineteenth century as period of, 28
Dougherty, Trent, 145–146
“Dover Beach” (Arnold), 23
Down Syndrome children, 273
Doxastic (impulsive) evidence, 193
D-supervenience, 135–136
Dualism, Sidgwickian, 257–262, 267–268
Dumbfounding, moral, 189
Dumont, Michele, 230, 230n25
Duns Scotus, John, 289
Durham, University of, Lewis lectures at, 244
Dursey, Dudley, 232
Duties. *See Obligations*
Dying for one's country (death for a good cause, sacrificial death), 245–250, 254–257, 267
Earthquakes, 82–83
Eddington, Arthur, 52
EE (evolutionary ethics), 195–196
Egalitarianism, 162, 295n30
Egoism, 119–120, 259–260
Eliot, T. S., 38
Emotions, as ground for morality, 155
Empathy, 155, 227–228
Empiricism, 28
EN (evolutionary naturalism), 198, 200–202
English morality, 284n11
Enlightenment: on moral truths, 118; naturalism and, 27
Enoch, David, 187, 205–208, 291
Entire marriages, 227
Epictetus (philosopher), 33–34
Epicurus (philosopher), 26
Epistemology: Adams on, 204; epistemic facts, description of, 113–114; epistemic imperialism, 192; epistemic norms, 186; Foot's analysis, epistemic challenge to, 132; metaphysics and, Nagel on, 46
Ethical naturalism, 166, 202–205
The Ethical Project (Kitcher), 159–160
Ethics: Dewey on, 30; dimensions of, 214; ethical standards, 160–161; as practical rationality, 237
Ethics (Spinoza), 28
Etiquette, rules of, 149
Euthyphro (Plato), 7, 26, 33
Euthyphro Dilemma, 6–7, 39
Evans, C. Stephen: on Anscombe, 152; on authority, 151; on divine command theory, 289; on ethical naturalism, 166; good, theory of, 287; on hypothetical observers, 162–163; on morality and religious belief, 215; on moral obligations, 152–153; on natural law theory, 287n18, 289n22; on natural signs, 116–117

Events, that ought not to have happened, 81–82, 92, 93–94. *See also* Problem of evil

Evidence, doxastic, 193

Evil: Christianity on, 301; moral, 82–84, 98, 106–110; natural evil, 82–84, 91–92, 97; Pascal on, 119; Plantinga on, 278–279; theistic argument from, 278. *See also* Morality; Problem of evil

Evil, freedom, and moral responsibility, 79–111; freedom, responsibility, and moral evil, 106–110; Freud on, 90–91; Hume on, 84–86; Kant on, 87–88; moral freedom, responsibility, and evil, 98–101; naturalists, disagreements among, 101–106; Neiman on, 91–92; Nietzsche on, 88–90; overview, 79–80; problem of evil, essentialness of, 92–94; problem of evil, hope and, 110–111; problem of evil, paradigm shift on, 80–84; suffering and the natural order, 94–97. *See also* Problem of evil

Evil and the God of Love (Hick), 87

Evil (bad) maxim, 218

Evolution: evolutionary accounts of moral obligations, 155–164; evolutionary debunking arguments, 200–201, 202–205; evolutionary ethics, 195–196; evolutionary moral psychology, 132, 290; evolutionary naturalism, 198, 200–202; impact on natural theology, 29; problematic nature of, 157–158, 296–297

Explanation candidates, in IBE, 19

Explanatory gap, of secular theories, 210

Externalism/internalism distinction, 169

Extreme particularism, 231

Facts: FACTS, 239–240; moral, 15–19, 72, 175; salient, requiring explanation, in IBE, 15–19; skepticism about, 239–240

Faith, 23, 242, 265–266. *See also* Happiness; Virtue

Feelings: of guilt, guilt vs., 149–150; objective moral truth and, 247; of obligation, obligations vs., 147, 156

Felicification, 135

Female infanticide, 195, 196, 197

Finite goodness, 135

Flanagan, Owen, 141

Flannagan, Matt, 171n24

Flew, Antony, 11–13

Flight 93 (9/11), 111

Flourishing, 128, 212n39

Flowers, 23, 54

Fool (Hobbes's), 170

Foot, Philippa: critique of, 280; importance to moral theory, 280n6; Ritchie's consideration of, 209–210; on rules of etiquette, 149; theoretical locus of, 165; theory of Aristotelian categoricals, 124–132, 212n39

Forbidden actions (moral prohibitions), 147–148, 154

Formula of the End in Itself variant (of categorical imperative), 218

Franklin, Benjamin, 216

Fratricide, 196, 197

"A Free Man's Worship" (Russell), 236

Free will (freedom): libertarian freedom, 101–102, 107; moral freedom, 98–101; naturalism vs. theism and, 104; Nietzsche on, 90; problem of evil and, 276–280; responsibility and moral evil and, 106–110; value of, 98–99. *See also* Evil, freedom, and moral responsibility; Morality

Freppert, Lucan, 121n1

Freud, Sigmund, 90–91

Friendship, impartiality and, 230n25

From Darwin to Nietzsche (Tille), 28–29

From Morality to Metaphysics (Ritchie), 208–211

Functionalist approach, to moral obligations, 155–158

Gaarder, Jostein, 273n1

Galilei, Galileo, 27

Gauthier, David, 233–234

Genders, differences in ability to meet moral demand, 227–228

General revelation, 60

Genocide, utilitarianism on, 124

Gettier cases, 181–183, 194–199

Ghosts, as literary convention, 51

Gibbard, A., 207, 209

Gilligan, Carol, 227–228, 229

Goals (telos), of human beings, 214

God: assistance of, secular substitutes for, 233–234; commands of, 135, 289; as Creator God, 307–308; death of, 29, 36–37; divine goodness, 78, 280; evil as challenge to, 82; as the Good and the Beautiful, 47n39; as Ground of Being, 7–8; humans' love of, 298; "I am" declaration, 58; Kant on, 265–266; knowledge from, 213; Lewis on, 49–50; maxims of, 219; moral attributes of, 11–12; moral evil and, 110; moral goodness of, 280–281n7; moral indifference of, 85–86; nature of, 307; necessity for, 64–65; Nietzsche on, 3; perfect being theology, 55–60; personhood of, 285, 296; secular substitutes for, 233–234; will of, 34. *See also* Divine command theories; Goodness; Love; Theism

God, existence of: abductive moral case for, 133; atheism and, 36; Layman on, 62; moral argument and, 77; Nagel on, 44; natural signs and, 116; Plato on, 84. *See also* Abductive moral arguments; Moral apologetics; Theism

God and Other Minds (Plantinga), 146

God of the gaps argument, 6

God's Not Dead (movie), 3–6

Goetz, Stewart, 140

Gold, 165

Goldstein, Rebecca Newberger, 7

Good. *See* Goodness

Good God (Baggett and Walls): Craig's critique of, 68, 70; Hare on, 12n1, 64; overview of, 13; on problem of evil and moral argument, 21; Reichenbach's critique of, 280–281n7; summary of, 274; theistic ethics, defense of objections to, 13

Good maxim, 218, 266

Goodness: being, relationship to, 12; divine goodness, 78, 280; divine motivation theory on, 139; finite goodness, 135; as flourishing, 128; flowers and, 23; highest good, 87, 263–264, 265–266; less-than-perfect, 59–60; moral, 165, 166–167, 196, 280–287; natural, 126; obligation, comparison with, 16; right, difference from, 16, 246; of soldiers, 287–288

Grace, 31, 293

Grass, walking on, 177

The Great Divorce (Lewis), 232

Greeks, ancient, gods of, 60

Greene, Joshua, 198

Grounding relations, 136–137

Ground of Being, God as, 7–8

Guilt, 108–109, 149–150, 175–176

Habermas, Jürgen, 233, 295n30

Haidt, Jonathan, 189

Happiness: as flourishing, 128; Hume on, 85–86; Kant on, 263; morality, convergence with, 217; universal, 257–258; virtue and, 87–88, 297–299. *See also* Moral rationality; Virtue

Hardy, Sarah, 198

Hare, John: on Aristotle's considerations of the divine, 33; on futility, 226; on God, secular substitutes for, 233–234; *Good God*, review of, 64; on language of Ockhamism, 121n1; moral gap, use of phrase, 216; on moral gap, 223–224; on moral judgments, 229–232; on moral transformation, 214; on rationalization, 225–226; on self-interest, 224–225; on utilitarianism, 226; on Walker, 230n25

Hare, R. M., 226

Harman, Gilbert: evolutionary debunking argument of, 200–201; evolutionary moral psychology and, 132; on Hitler, 172; IBE, identification of, 14–15; on moral realism, 133, 171; reflective equilibrium, views on, 187, 188; Sturgeon's response to, 203

Harris, Sam, 24–25, 32, 61, 224n11, 233

Hart, David Bentley, 5, 115, 281–282

Hazony, Yoram, 55–60

Health, doctors' relationship to, 213

Heaven, 39, 235

Hebrew God, 57–58, 59

Hebrew Scripture. *See* Old Testament

Hecht, Jennifer Michael, 28

Hell, 12

Heraclitus (philosopher), 26

Heroic actions, 247

Hick, John, 87

Highest good, Kant on, 87, 263–264, 265–266

Historical Christianity, as nonabsolutist supernaturalism, 36n21

History, role in moral argument, 294–295

Hitchens, Christopher, 32

Hitler, Adolph, 170, 172–173, 203

Hobbesian egoism, 119–120

Hodge, Charles, 16

Holbach, Paul Henri Thiry, baron d', 28

Holiness, 236

Holmes, Arthur, 284

Holmes, Sherlock (fict.), 54–55

Holocaust, 82, 170

Homeostasis, 166

Homo sapiens, 296–297

Hope, 30, 301

Horgan, Terry, 190–191, 239–240

"How to Be an Anti-Realist" (Plantinga), 61

Hull, David, 296

Human freedom. *See* Free will; Morality

Humanism: Christian humanists, 283–284; humanistic (quasi-)religion, 35–36n21

The Humanist Manifesto (1933), 30, 35

Humanist Manifesto II (1973), 118

Humanity (human beings): explanations, need for, 187; human achievements, context for, 5; human agency, naturalism's difficulty with, 283; human dignity, 123, 281; human nature, question of, naturalism and, 38–39; human rights, 117, 195–197; intrinsic human worth, 132–144; moral goals of, 214; oughtness of, 126; possible obligation to avoid abolition of, 252–253; as thinking reed, 95

Human value (human worth): Foot's failure of justification for, 129–132; historical views of, 142; realism and explanation for, 132–144; undermining of, Bethke-Elshtain on, 122n11; worldviews, relationship to, 281–283. *See also* Morality; Moral value

Hume, David, 84–86, 138, 179, 238–242
Hunter-gatherers, 162
Huxley, Thomas, 158
Hybrid internalism, 168n22
Hypotheses, in IBE, 15
Hypothetical agreement, 161–162
Hypothetical imperatives, 148–149

“I am” declaration (book of Exodus), 58
IBE (inference to the best explanation), 14–21, 74, 186–187, 205
Idealism, 275
Ideals, reality vs., 92–93
Identity, of moral beings, Korsgaard on, 133n19
Idiosyncrasy argument, 159
Illusion(s), 90, 179
Imago dei (image of God), humans as imbued with, 71, 76, 117, 284–286, 295, 296, 300
Immortality, 264–265
Impartiality, 224, 225, 230n25
Impeccability, problem of Reichenbach on, 281n7
Imperatives. *See* Moral obligations; Obligations
Imperfect duties, 230n25
Imprescriptible rights, 121
Impulsional (doxastic) evidence, 193
In a Different Voice (Gilligan), 227
Incarnation, 53
Inclinationism, 287n18
Incompatibilists, sources of agent actions and, 107
Indifference, moral, 94–95
Individuals, 122. *See also* Humanity (human beings)
Induction, 190
Indulgences, 17
Infanticide, female, 195, 196, 197
Inference to the best explanation (IBE), 14–21, 74, 186–187, 205
Inferential knowledge, 182
Inherent human dignity, 281
Inordinate love, 232
Instinct, as reason for sacrificial death, 249–250
Integrated worldview (comprehensive natural order), 46, 47, 48, 52
Integration, Nagle’s necessity for, 44
Intellectual life, constituents of, 190
Intelligibility, Nagel on theism on, 45
Intention, 45, 96, 141
Internalism, 168–169
Interventions by God in world (miracles), 47–48, 50–52
Intrinsicality: intrinsic human worth, 132–144; intrinsic value, 134; relationship to relationality, 286
An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics (James), 161–162
Intuition (general), 153, 187–189, 191
Intuition, Anscombe, 152, 153, 164, 208, 289, 290
Ionian Enchantment, 26
Is and ought, gap between, 88, 110, 111, 219
Isolation tests, of intrinsic value, 134n20
Israelites, ancient, God of, 57–58

Jackson, Frank, 137, 138
James, Scott M., 18, 147–148, 150, 161–164, 165n17
James, William: absolutism, aversion to, 64; Brown on, 192; as founder of pragmatism, 29; on God, moral argument for, 55; interpretations of, 30–31; on justification, 191–192n10; Kant, mistaken understanding of, 223; on moral beliefs, 192; on moral knowledge, 191; naturalist cause, enlistment into, 34–35; on non-sensible experiences, 193; on obligation, 63; on rationality and evidence, 190; on secular

moralists, Christians vs., 297n35; Sorley's methodological similarity to, 188; terminology of, 40

Jesus, 11, 60, 82, 295

Jordan, Matt, 286n16

Joy, in destruction, 89

Joyce, Richard: on evolutionary moral psychology, 290; on goodness vs. moral goodness, 196; on Kant on categorical imperative, 153; on logic and morality, 185; on moral good, 280; on moral knowledge, 201; on moral obligations, 290; on rules of etiquette, 149; Wilenberg on, 291

JTB (justification, truth, and belief), 189, 190, 194

Judgments, moral, 147–148, 199–200

Just desserts. *See* Punishment

Justice: duties of, Mill on, 121; Sturgeon on, 204; as virtue, 152

Justification: certainty and, 194; cognitive systems and, 188–189; importance of, 191–192n10; justification, truth, and belief (JTB), 189, 190, 194; justified moral beliefs, 203–204; moral, 199–202; objective vs. subjective, 181

Kagan, Shelly, 223–224

Kahane, Guy, 201

Kahneman, Daniel, 188

Kant, Immanuel: on duties, perfect vs. imperfect, 230n25; on evil, freedom, and moral responsibility, 87–88; on happiness and virtue, 297–298; Hare on, 234; on humans' moral quandary, 222–223; on impartiality, 230n25; on imperatives, 148–149, 167–168; inconsistency of, 222–223; Kantian moral faith, 217, 237, 244, 264–266, 293–299; Mavrodes on, 268–269; on moral demand, reduction of, 226; moral duties tradition, 170–171; on moral gap, 217, 218, 226; on others, treatment of, 283; on personal happiness, 262–266; Sidgwick, differences from, 269; theism of, 220–221n6; universalism of, 230, 230n25; value of ethical theories of, 74; on wonder, 273, 303. *See also* Happiness; Moral rationality; Moral transformation

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 2

Kingdom of Ends variant (of categorical imperative), 218–219

Kitcher, Philip, 159–161

Knowledge: discursive, 181, 183–188; inferential, 182; justified true belief vs., 189–190, 197; nondiscursive, 182, 188–194; prerequisites for, 190. *See also* Moral knowledge

Kohlberg, Lawrence, 229

Korsgaard, Christine, 133n19, 209, 252

Kripke, Saul, 204, 239–240

Kushner, Harold, 56

La Mettrie, Julien Offray de, 28

Language: Cornell realists and, 164–165; deontic, 74; de Waal's, 157–158; fluidity of, 247; Foot on, 125, 126; of just desserts, 101, 277; Mill's, 122; moral, 1, 152, 154, 164–165; of moral objectivity, 61; on moral obligations, 149–150, 156; natural language, 239; of Ockhamism, 12n1; ought language, 175, 247; permanence of meaning of, 239; purposive, 127

Laws: Law of Nature, 217; of logic, guilt not resulting from, 176; moral laws, 149, 263–264; moral vs. of logic, 175

Layman, C. Stephen, 62, 63

Leeway condition, 106

Leibniz, Gottfried, 12

Leucippus (philosopher), 37

Lewis, C. S.: on abolition of man, 305–306; apologetics of, 244; on axiomatic truths, 244–246, 250; on Christian worldview, 49–50; on death, 141; on false justifications, 142–143; on gender conflicts, 227, 228; on inordinate love, 232; on logic and morality, 185; on miracles, 47–48, 50–53; on moral demand, 149; on moral gap, 216–217, 219, 221–222; on morality, 214; on objective morality, argument for, 245–257; on objective moral truth, 244–251, 267; on pantheism, 49; on settling, 120; Sidgwick, differences from, 267; on transformation, process of, 294

Lewy, Guenter, 284n12

Libertarian freedom, moral responsibility and, 101–102, 107

Libresco, Leah, 14n2

Life after Faith (Kitcher), 159

Linville, Mark: on Blackmore, 141; evolutionary naturalism, argument against, 202; on Kant on moral law, 283; on love of one's neighbors, 285; on moral agency, 283n9; on moral and natural properties, 205; Ritchie, comparison with, 210–211; on teleological explanations, 284–285; on utilitarianism, 121–122; Wielenberg's critique of, 139

Lions, morality of, 198

Lisbon, Spain, earthquake in, 82, 92

Locke, John, 243

Logical norms, 175–176, 184–185

Love: impartiality and, 230n25; inordinate love, 232; loving relationships, intrinsic value of, 134; of one's neighbors, 285; perfect, 299

Luck, 198

Lucretius (Roman poet), 26

Lutheranism, on supererogation, 16

Lying, prohibition against, Kant on, 167

MacIntyre, Alasdair, 296

Mackie, J. L.: as challenging moral realism, 133, 185–186; on moral facts in naturalism, 171; on moral obligations, 151, 290; on moral properties, 120; moral skepticism of, 39

Madoff, Bernie, 107–109

Making, 135–137, 139–140

Manifestos: *Christian Humanist Manifesto* (1982), 284; *The Humanist Manifesto* (1933), 30, 35; *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), 118

Marks, Joel, 68, 76, 76n27

Materialism, 23. *See also* Naturalism

Matthew 5:16, 295

Mavrodes, George, 268–269

Maxims, 218–219, 266

McDowell, John, 212n39

McFall, Lynne, 230, 230n25

McGrew, Tim, 78n28

McPherson, Tristram, 138

Meaningful work, intrinsic value of, 134

Men, stereotypes on, 227–228

Menuge, Angus, 124, 195–196, 197, 280

Mere Christianity (Lewis), 149, 221–222, 244

Meta-ethics, 199

Metaphysical imperialism, 205

Metaphysics, Nagel on epistemology and, 46

Methodist Church, Twenty-Five Articles of, 17

The Methods of Ethics (Sidgwick), 257

Miletus (ancient Greek city), 26

Mill, John Stuart, 121

Milliken, John, 62–63, 67

Mind: Nagel on, 44–45; philosophy of, 206

Mind and Cosmos (Nagel), 40, 41, 300

The Mind of the Maker (Sayers), 51

Miracles (interventions by God in world), 47–48, 50–52

Miracles (Lewis), 47–48

Misanthropes, 225

Mistakes, nature of, 108

Modal status thesis, 289

Modern thought, Neiman on history of, 80–81

Monistic absolutism, on James's philosophy of religion, 35–36n21

Montaigne, Michel de, 27

Moore, G. E., 134, 191

Moral apologetics (moral arguments), 273–302; acrostic on objections to deductive variant of, 78n28; beauty and truth, 299–302; benefits of, 11; characteristics of, 274–276; description of, 114; free will and problem of evil, 276–280; happiness and virtue, 297–299; moral goodness, 280–287; moral knowledge, 290–293; moral obligations, 287–290; moral transformation, 293–297; nature of, 274–276; need for, 13; overview of, 273–274; pivotal aspects of, 214; problem of evil and, 21, 279–280. *See also* Abductive moral arguments

Moral axiology. *See* Morality

Moral duties. *See* Moral obligations

Moral gap, 214–222; as challenge for secularism, 293; deontic principle for, 220; Franklin's experience with, 216; inevitability of, 219; Kant vs. Lewis on, 216–222; of naturalism, 236–237; overview of, 214–215

Moralistic, as derogatory term, 1

Morality: in atheistic world, 65; Bugliosi on, 37; complexity of, 241–242; description of, 276; English, 284n11; first principles of, 254; Gauthier on, 233–234; happiness, convergence with, 217; as intellectual puzzle, 54; James on, 18, 297n35; moral agency, 90, 218, 283n9; moral anti-realism, 3; moral beauty, 2; moral beings, Korsgaard on, 133n19; moral beliefs, 197, 291; moral confidence, 237; moral considerations, in internalism, 170; moral culpability, 176n30; moral defects, 126; moral demand, 149, 226–233; moral despair, 238–239; moral desserts, 99; moral dumbfounding, 189; moral evil, 82–84, 98, 106–110; moral facts, 15–19, 72, 175; moral faith, 242, 266; moral forbiddenss, 147; moral freedom, 98–101; moral Gettier cases, 194–199; moral goals (telos), of human beings, 214; moral goodness (moral axiology), 165, 166–167, 196, 280–287; moral indifference, 94–95; moral intuitions, 188–189; moralizing species, 198; moral judgments, 147–148, 199–200; moral justification, 199–202; moral language, Cornell realists on, 164–165; moral laws, 149, 263–264; moral life, 222–226, 224n11; moral motivation, 151; moral natural signs, 116–119; moral norms, 175–176, 184–185; moral objectivism, 69, 125–132; moral ontology, 150, 195, 251, 300; moral particularism, 139; moral perfectionism, 215–216, 235, 294; moral permissibility, 147; moral prohibitions (forbidden actions), 147–148, 154; moral properties, 120, 202–203; moral realism, 36, 119, 133n19, 134, 212n39; moral responsibility, 98, 99, 101, 103, 109; moral sense, 29n7; moral skepticism, 179; moral standing, 119, 120–124; moral theory, 72–73, 75, 133n19; nature of, 168, 303; nature of explanations for, 217–218; personal self-interest and, 254–257; purpose of, 237; religion, relationship to, 215; Ritchie on, 133n19. *See also* Evil,

freedom, and moral responsibility; Free will; Happiness; Moral apologetics; Moral gap; Moral obligations; Moral truth; Moral value; Naturalism; Punishment; Theism; Virtue

Moral knowledge, 179–212; conclusions on, 212; discursive, 183–188; ethical naturalists and evolutionary debunking arguments, 202–205; as moral argument, 290–293; moral Gettier cases, 194–199; moral justification, challenges to, 199–202; nondiscursive, 188–194; overview, 179–180; robust realism and debunking arguments, 205–209; scenarios on, 180–183; sources of, 251–252; theism, Ritchie’s support for, 209–211

The Moral Landscape (Harris), 224n11

Moral obligations, 145–178; authority and, 146–154; Cornell realists and, 164–174; description of, 16; divine command theory on, 289n22; evolutionary accounts of, 158–164; functionalist approach to, 155–158; is and ought, gap between, 88, 110, 111, 219; as moral argument, 287–290; non-natural normative realism, 174–178; ought statements, derivation of, 249; overview, 145–146; ultimate sanctions, requirement for, 268

Moral rationality, 243–269; Kant on personal happiness, 262–266; morality and personal self-interest, 254–257; moral reasoning, 227–228; objective moral truth, 244–251; objective moral truth, dualism and postulates of practical reason and, 267–269; objective moral truth, sufficiency of, 251–254; overview, 243–244; Sidgwickian dualism, 257–262

Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Brink), 167

Morals by Agreement (Gauthier), 233–234

Moral transformation, 213–242; human experience of, 234–237; Humean skepticism, inadequacy of, 238–242; as moral argument, 293–297; moral demand, reduction of, 226–233; moral gap, 214–222; moral life, exaggeration of human capacity for, 222–226; overview, 213–214; principled moral faith, 242; secular substitutes for God’s assistance, 233–234

Moral truth: abductive moral arguments, 54–78; abuses of, 1–2; conclusions on, 303–308; evil, freedom, and moral responsibility, 79–111; moral arguments, 273–302; moral knowledge, 179–212; moral obligations, 145–178; moral transformation, 213–242; moral value, 115–144; naturalism, 23–53; on naturalism, assumption of possibility of, 194n12; overview, 1–9; significance of, 275–276

Moral value, 115–144; description of, 16, 18–19; Hobbesian egoism, 119–120; intrinsic human worth, robust realism and, 132–144; natural law and Aristotelian categoricals, 124–132; natural signs, 116–119; overview, 115–116; utilitarianism and moral standing, 120–124

Moreland, J. P.: on atheism, 65; on logical and moral norms, 175; on morality, 18–19; on naturalism, 41; on values, 41–43; on worldviews, 40

Morphological rationalism, 190–191

Morris, Tom, 59, 61

Morrow, Lance, 79–80

Motivation, 151, 168, 169, 170, 173, 174

Muggeridge, Malcolm, 234

Mythology, Northern, 256–257

Nagel, Thomas, 39–52; on actions, control of, 106; on awakening universe, 305–306; concerns of, response to, 46–53; on human capacities, 95–96; *Mind and Cosmos*, 40, 41, 300; and miracles, problem of, 50–53; on moral realism, 170; Moreland on, 41; on objective moral truth, 104–105; panpsychism and, 49; on self-understanding, 104; summary of concerns of, 46; theism, bias against, 43–46, 299; on theism, 40–41; on values, 41–43

Narrowing criteria, in IBE, 19–20

Natural capacities, human rights and, 196

Natural goodness, 126

Natural Goodness (Foot), 125

Natural history, human rights and, 195–196

Natural-history sentences. *See* Aristotelian categoricals

Natural impulses, 251

Naturalism, 23–53; on agency, 277; critiques of, 12, 52, 78, 115, 178; deflationary fallacy, 32–36; divisions within, 36–39, 42–43, 101–106; ethical naturalism, 166, 202–205; on exaggeration of human powers, 223–224; historical review of, 26–29; human dignity, difficulty with, 283–284; justification challenge to, 199–202; limitations of, 41, 73, 220, 271–272, 296–297; on logic and morality, 185–188; miracles, rejection of, 47–48; moral gap in, 236–237; moral Gettier cases as challenges to, 194–199; moral knowledge and, 183–184; on moral laws, 175; moral realism of, 274; moral responsibility and, 98–101; moral truth on assumption of possibility of, 194n12; Nagel’s antitheism, 39–53; natural evil, 82–84, 91–92, 97; naturalistic moral objectivity, 125–132; naturalistic world, moral truth in, 2–3; overview, 23–26; twentieth century pragmatists, 29–32. *See also* Atheism; Secularism; *entries beginning “natural”*

Natural law and natural law theory, 124–132, 149, 287n18, 289n22

Natural normativity, utilitarianism vs., 129–130

Natural order, 46, 47, 94–97

Natural rights, 117, 121

Natural selection, 211

Natural signs, 116–119

Natural world (nature), 50, 87–88. *See also* Real world (reality)

“The Naval Treaty” (Doyle), 23

Nazis, 61, 287–288

Necessary moral facts (necessary truths), 62n14, 171–172

Neediness, 263

Neighbors, love of, 285

Neiman, Susan: on humans as part of natural world, 98; on natural evil, 91–92; on problem of evil, 80–84, 92–93, 95, 97, 110; on progress, 110–111

New Atheists, 32, 41, 59

New men, becoming. *See* Moral transformation

New Testament: Matthew 5:16, 295; on perfect God, 60

Newton, Isaac, 28, 305

The New York Times (newspaper), Hazony article in, 55–56

Nielsen, Kai, 118–119

Nietzsche, Friedrich: atheists’ views of, 64; Baggett and Walls on, 70; on English morality, 284n11; on evil, freedom, and moral responsibility, 88–90; on free will, 277;

fundamental insight of, 28–29; on God, existence of, 3; on natural values, 118; on truth, nature of, 253–254, 255

Nihilism, 36, 64, 65, 69, 179

Nineteenth century, as period of doubt, 28

9/11 terrorist attacks, 110, 111

Noddings, Nell, 229, 231

Nonabsolutist supernaturalism, 36n21

Nondiscursive (moral) knowledge, 182, 188–194

Non-hypothetical imperatives, 149

Nonintentional teleology, 42

Non-naturalism, 138, 174–178, 205–209, 290

Normativism: normative beliefs, 207; normative governance mechanism, 207; normative realism, 138; normative reasons, 174, 208; normative truths, 207; normativity challenge, to Foot's analysis, 131–132

Norms, 175–176, 184–185, 186

Northern mythology, 256–257

Notre Dame Cathedral, 5

Nussbaum, Martha, 33

Objective moral truth (*Tao*): dualism and postulates of practical reason and, 267–269; existence of God and, 60–63; Lewis on, 244–251; sufficiency of, 251–254

Objectivism: moral, 14, 68, 69, 104–105, 125–132, 179; objective justification, 181; objective moral obligations, 146

Obligations (duties): deaths for a good cause and, 246–247; desire for, 224–225; felicification and, 135; goodness, comparison with, 16; James on, 63; Kant on existence of God and, 265–266; as moral judgments, 147; obligation principle, 298n36; perfect vs. imperfect, 230n25. *See also* Moral obligations; Values

Ockhamism, 12

Odds, of rolling dice, deductive inference and, 78n28

Old Testament, perfect God and portrayal of God in, 56–57

Omnibenevolence, 57, 59–60

Omnipotence, 57–58, 59

Omniscience, 57, 59

Ontologies, 113, 150, 195, 251, 300

On What Matters (Parfit), 174

Oppenheimer, Robert, 288

Ordinate affections, 247

Origin of the Species (Darwin), 29

Ought and oughtness. *See* Moral obligations

Paley, William, 135

Panpsychism, 49

Pantheism, Nagel and Lewis on, 49

Paradoxes, plus versus quus, 239

Parents, responsibilities of, 232

Parfit, Derek, 174, 198–199

Particularism, moral, 139

Particular moral judgments, 230–231

Pascal, Blaise, 95, 119

Peirce, Charles Sanders, 14–15, 29

Perfect being theology (perfect God), 55–60

Perfect duties, 121, 230n25

Perfection, 55–60, 215–216, 235–236, 294

Permissibility, 147, 298n36

Persecution, lack of, in Western world, 4n2

Personal _____. *See main concept, e.g., for “personal self-interest” see “self-interest”*

Personhood, 285, 295–296

Pestilential creatures, 129–130

Pharisees, 218

Philo (fict.), 84–85

Philosophy of mind, 206

Physical science, as explanation of entire reality, Nagel on, 300

Pigliucci, Massimo, 24–25

Piper, John, 298n36

Plantinga, Alvin: on abduction, 20; Baylor University conference on, 145–146; on beliefs, evidential support for, 191; classical theism, belief in, 46; on *Consciousness Explained*, 141; on doxastic evidence, 193; on evil, 278–279; on God, direct knowledge of, 40; on justification, importance of, 191–192n10; Kitcher, critique of, 160–161; on logic and morality, 185; on moral truths, God and, 6; Nagel's review of, 41; on naturalism, conjunction with evolution, 200; on necessary truths, 175; on objective moral obligations, 290; ontological argument, critical work on, 78; on personhood, 295–296; problem of evil, answer to, 57; Ritchie, comparison with, 21; on theistic argument from evil, 278

Plants, schema of natural normativity of, 127–128

Plato and Platonism: *Euthyphro*, 7, 26, 33; on goodness, 287; on human nature, 297; on morally permissible acts, 7; on truth, goodness, and beauty, 93; Wielenberg's position as Platonism, 138

Plato at the Googleplex (Goldstein), 7

Plus versus quus paradox, 239

Postulates, of practical reason, 267–269

Practical clout, 149

Practical rationality, 237. *See also* Objective moral truth

Practical reason, 264, 267–269

Pragmatism, 29–32, 33, 38, 160, 165n17

Predestination, 12

Pre-Socratics, 33

Primates, 155, 156, 157, 162

Principled moral faith, 242

Principles: of alternative possibilities, 106–107; Principle X, 138; satisfaction principle, 298n36; of sufficient reason, 93

Prinz, J., 161

Problem of evil: Adams on, 57n6; atheism on, 301; Christianity on, 307; essentialness of, 92–94; Flew and, 13; free will and, 276–280; Freud on, 91; hope and, 110–111; Hume on, 86; as issue, seriousness of, 47; Kant on, 87–88, 263; moral argument, relationship to, 21, 279–280; Neiman on, 80–84, 92–93, 95, 97, 110; Nietzsche on, 88–90; overview of, 79–80; paradigm shift on, 80–84; perfect God and, 56; recognition of, 96. *See also* Evil; Evil, freedom, and moral responsibility

Progress, 93, 110–111

Prohibitions. *See* Morality

Promises and promise keeping, 100, 105–106, 128, 131

Properly basic beliefs, 190, 192–193

Properties: moral vs. natural, 202–203; normative vs. non-normative, 136

Protestantism, on supererogation, 16–17

Providence. *See* God

Psychological capacities, 159

Psychology Today (website), *God's Not Dead*, critique of, 5

Punishment (desserts): in civilized society, 100, 105; just desserts, 100, 101, 277–278; Madoff and, 107–109; moral desserts, 99; moral judgments and, 148

Purposive language, 127

Quine, W. V. O., 29, 32

Radical moral transformation, need for, 218, 222, 242, 293, 303

Radical voluntarism, 12n1

Random time scenario, 180

Rape, 122

Rashdall, Hastings, 140

Rationality. *See* Reason

Rationalization, self-interest and, 225–226

Rawls, John, 151, 162, 187

Real identity thesis, 287n18

Realism: moral anti-realism, 3; moral realism, 36, 119, 133n19, 134, 212n39; normative realism, 138; robust, 132–144, 205–209; substantive moral realism, 133n19

Real world (reality): agreement of Lewis and Nagel on, 52; Anselmian theists on, 71; atheists' view of, 64, 65, 67, 69, 72; comic vision of, 235; as fallen world, 97; ideals vs., 92–93; injustices of, 56; morality as roadmap to, 303; moral truth and, 75–76; Nagel vs. Lewis on, 51–52; necessity of God for, 67; Nietzsche on, 89; as root of moral obligation, 268; as source for secular ethical theories, 74. *See also* Natural world

Reason (rationality): in early Christian theology, 27; God's design of brains and, 198–199; intuition vs., 189; Kant on, 264, 265–266; natural rights and, 117; normative, 174, 208; reason internalism, 168, 169, 170, 171, 173; self-interest and, 233–234; theoretical vs. practical, 184–185. *See also* Moral rationality

Reasons Fundamentalism (RF), 211–212n39

The Recalcitrant Imago Dei (Moreland), 41

Redundancy argument, 159

Reflective equilibrium, 187

Regretful atheism, 300–301

Reichenbach, Bruce, 280–281n7

Reid, Thomas, 105

Relationality, 286

Religion: evil and, 119; Freud on, 90–91; Holmes on, 54–55; James on, 297n35; morality, relationship to, 215. *See also* Christianity; Theism

Renaissance, naturalism in, 27

Reppert, Victor, 185

Required actions. *See* Moral obligations; Obligations

Respect-for-persons, 119

Responsibility, 98–101, 106–110. *See also* Morality

Resurrection, 11, 13, 82, 233

Retribution. *See* Punishment

RF (Reasons Fundamentalism), 211–212n39

Riddell Memorial Lectures, 244

Rightness, comparison with goodness, 16, 246

Rights: human rights, 117, 195–197; imprescriptible, 121; "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 118

Risks, of moral life, 241

Ritchie, Angus: on Christian humanism, 284n12; Foot, critique of, 130; on moral beliefs, 292–293; on morality, 133n19, 280; on moral knowledge, 291–292; on norms of reasoning, 186; theism, moral argument for, 209–211

Robust Ethics (Wielenberg), 133–134, 208

Robust realism and intrinsic human worth, 132–144

Roman Catholic Church, decline during Renaissance, 27

Rorty, Richard, 31, 34–35, 227

Rosen, Gideon, 137

Ross, William David, 168

R-supervenience, 135

Rules of etiquette, 149

Ruse, Michael, 2, 158–159, 179, 185, 201

Russell, Bertrand, 181, 194, 236

Sacrificial death (death for a good cause), 245–250, 254–257, 267

Saint Peter's Basilica, 27

Salvation by works, 17

Sanctions, 148. *See also* Punishment (desserts)

Santayana, George, 29, 30, 199, 235, 236, 304

Sartre, Jean-Paul, 39, 290

Satisfaction principle, 298n36

Sayers, Dorothy, 51

Scanlon, T. M., 162, 209, 211n39

Scenarios, on moral knowledge, 180–183

Schaffer, Jonathan, 136–137

Schrödinger, Erwin, 49

Science: belief in law in nature and, 52; Christianity, connection to, 305; as explanation of entire reality, 300; naturalism and, 38

Scotus (John Duns Scotus), 289

Scripture, 60. *See also* Bible

Secular humanism, 283

Secularism (secular ethics): disagreements within, 36–39; Euthyphro Dilemma, response to, 6–7; failures of, 14, 211–212n39; God's assistance, substitutes for, 233–234; inconsistency of, 37, 284n12; moral gap and, 215–222; problem of goodness and, 280; secular moral fideism, 242; secular moralists, moral life of, 297n35; secular spirituality, 233; on teleology, 275; as term, 36; value theories of, 165; Wielenberg's claim on, 252. *See also* Atheism; Naturalism

Self-interest: impartiality and, 224; importance of, 119–120; Kant on, 266; Kant vs. Sidgwick on, 269; morality, relationship with, 254–257; as moral motivation, 266; preoccupation with, moral gap and, 218–219; rationality and, 233–234; rationalization as, 225–226. *See also* Happiness

Selfishness, question of rationality of, 248

Self-love, Kant on, 262

Sensus divinitatis, 40, 46

Shame, 89

Shermer, Michael, 24–25

Ships, as analogy for morality, 214, 293

Should. *See* Moral obligations

Sidgwick, Henry, 257–262, 267–268, 269

Signs, moral natural, 116–119

Simplicity, 6, 56, 300

Simpson, Homer, on supererogation, 17n7

Sin, 17, 81, 176n30, 293–294, 307

Singer, Peter, 120

Sinnot-Armstrong, Walter, 66

Sire, James, 284

Sistine Chapel, 27

Skepticism, 179, 238–242

Slapstick (Vonnegut), 120

Slavery, 251

Smith, Scott, 296

Society: civilized, contracts in, 100; natural rights and, 121; social bonds, 151; social contract theories, on moral obligations, 160, 162, 163; sociality, psychological capacities enabling, 159; social requirement theory, 74, 151; social transformation, 294–295

Socrates, 7, 26, 33, 152–153

Soldiers, goodness of, 287–288

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, 228

Sommers, Christina Hoff, 228

Sorley, William, 188

Sourcehood, freedom and moral responsibility and, 106–107

Special relations, possibility of corruption in, 231–232

Spencer, Herbert, 158

Spencer, Nick, 284n12

Spener's problem, 222

Spinoza, Baruch, 28

Spirituality, secular, 233

Standards, in utilitarianism, 122–123

Stereotypes, 227–228

Stoicism, 26, 33–34, 87, 223, 263

Street, Sharon, 198, 201, 206

Strength, Nietzsche on, 90

Strong EE, 195–197

Strong internalism, 168

Stupidity, evil vs., 80

Sturgeon, Nicholas, 163–164, 187, 188, 199, 203–204

Subjectivism, 17–18, 181

Substantive moral realism, 133n19

Suffering, 94–97

Sufficient reason, principle of, 93

Supererogatory actions, 16–17

Supernaturalism, 35–36n21, 42–43, 46–53, 290. *See also* Theism

Supervenience, 134–136, 202–203, 204

Supreme Being. *See* God

Swinburne, Richard, 78

Sympathy, value of, 260

Systems 1 and 2 (cognitive systems), 188–190

Taking Morality Seriously (Enoch), 206

Taliaferro, Charles, 140

Tao. *See* Objective moral truth

Tarnas, Richard, 34

TDA. *See* the Deductive argument

Technology, impact on moral obligations, 231

Teleology: contemporary question of, 38; importance of central deontic conceptions to, 288–289; of moral argument, 275; Nagel on, 42; under naturalism, 284; Ritchie's support for, 211; teleological emergentism, 43; in theism, 295. *See also* Aristotelian categoricals

Telos (moral goals), of human beings, 214

Teresa, Mother, 2

Thales (philosopher), 26

Theism: beauty and truth of, 299–302; as best explanation for morality, 306–308; evil, theistic argument from, 278; on God, necessity for, 44, 64–65; on happiness and virtue, 298–299; Kant's, 220; on the mind, 44; moral evil in, 109–110; on moral goodness, 285–286; moral knowledge and, 209–210, 292–293; on moral obligations, 289–290; moral responsibility in, 109; on moral transformation, 295–297; Nagel on, 43–46, 96; objective morality, relationship to, 14; probability of, 20, 274n2; problem of evil and, 96–97, 279–280; Ritchie on, 209–211; Sidgwick on, 260–261; teleology in, 275; theistic ethics, 13, 14–15; on unity of happiness and virtue, 298–299. *See also* God; Supernaturalism

Theistic ethics, 13, 14–15

Theodicy, 93, 110. *See also* Problem of evil

Theoretical reason, practical reason vs., 264

Theory choice, norms of, 186

Thinking, Pascal on, 95

Third-factor explanations (of moral facts), 206–209, 212, 291, 292

Thompson, Michael, 126–127

Thomson, Judith, 205

Thrasymachus (fict.), 170

Tille, Alexander, 28–29

Time magazine, essay on evil, 79–80

Timmons, Mark, 190–191, 239–240

Timpe, Kevin, 106–107

Tinder, Glen, 306–307

Tolkein, J. R. R., 256–257

Torture, 137

Tracking relation (of moral beliefs), 201, 204–206, 208, 210–211, 292

Transcendence, 306–307

Transformation. *See* Moral transformation

Transition problem, in Foot's analysis, 131

Tribal warfare, 196

Trinity, 28in7, 298–299

Truth(s): absolute, pragmatists' aversion to, 31; beauty and, 299–302; justification, truth, and belief (JTB), 189, 190, 194; necessary, as reflection of God, 175; possibly destructive, acceptance of, 252–254. *See also* Moral truth

Twentieth century pragmatists, 29–32

Twenty-Five Articles of the Methodist Church, 17

Tyranny, 251

Tyson, Neil deGrasse, 305

Ultimacy principle, 298n36

Uniformity, 50–53

Unity, 50–53

Universal benevolence, principle of, 259–260

“Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UN), 118

Universal happiness, 257–258

Universalism, 229, 230n25

Universality, of objective moral truth, 244

Universal Law variant (of categorical imperative), 218

Universe, nature of, 303–304

University of Durham, Lewis lectures at, 244

Utilitarianism, 120–124, 129, 223–224, 226

Utilitarianism (Mill), 121

Values: of activities, 134; intrinsic value, 134; limitations of naturalism on, 41–43. *See also* Human value; Moral value; Obligations

Varieties of Religious Experience (James), 30, 193

Vice, as natural defect, 127

Victims, of rape, 122

Virtue, 87–88, 127, 243, 297–299. *See also* Happiness; Moral rationality

Vividness, 223–224, 225, 226

Voltaire, 92

Voluntarism, 12, 13

Vonnegut, Kurt, 120

Walker, Lawrence, 227–228

Walker, Margaret, 230

Waller, Bruce, 98–101, 103–104, 107–108

Walls, Jerry L., 12n1, 78n28, 287

Warrant and Proper Function (Plantinga), 191

Water, 165, 204

Watson, Peter, 28, 30–31, 38

Weak EE, 195, 197, 204–205

Weak internalism, 168

Wesley, John, 17

Whedon, Joss, 243

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? (Kushner), 56

Wielenberg, Erik, 133–144; Baggett, critique of, 133; on cognition, 188; critique of, 139–144; debunking arguments, response to, 205–206, 208–209; on human beings, intrinsic value of, 139; lack of account of intrinsic value, 286–287; on luck and

moral knowledge, 198–199; on making, 136–138; on moral beliefs mechanism, 291; on moralizing species, 198; on moral realism, 133–134; on necessary truths, 199; on obligations, 174–175; on Principle X, 138; on properties, normative and non-normative, 136; on supervenience, 134–137; theism on human goodness, challenge to, 285

Wilberforce, William, 2

Wilson, A. N., 28

Wilson, E. O., 26, 158–159, 179, 185

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 239, 247

Wolterstorff, Nicholas, 117, 192, 288

Women, stereotypes on, 227

Wonder, 273, 275, 303

Wood, David, 115–116

Wood, Wendy, 228

Work, 134, 288

Works of supererogation, 16–17

World as it is. *See* Real world

Worlds: possible, in which God does evil, 281n7. *See also* Natural world (nature); Real world (reality)

Worldviews: central features of, 104; compositionalism, 26; description of, 39–40; Moreland on naturalistic, 41; Nagel vs. Lewis on, 48; Newtonian, 28

Wright, N. T., 307

Wrong clock scenario, 180

Y (tracking phenomenon), 292

Zagzebski, Linda, 74, 75, 139, 236–241

